

MAKE IT SO 26



a Star Trek fanzine

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94

A LITTLE ADO

by

Eve Robinson

CAPTAIN'S LOG Stardate 46439.1

The Enterprise is en route to rendezvous with the USS Ajax, to which the newly promoted Lt Commander Danby has been posted as Second Officer. She is an excellent officer and takes with her our good wishes. Mr Danby will accompany his wife, leaving the Enterprise schoolroom understaffed until we reach Starbase 212. However, we will be taking on a passenger from the Ajax, a Professor Philippa Kodaly, who is apparently willing to join the teaching roster until she leaves the Enterprise for the University on Bokara Six.

"I met her yesterday when she reported to Sick Bay for the routine medical. I liked her. Very friendly."

"I'm looking forward to meeting her. She has quite a reputation as a literary scholar. I hope to have an opportunity to discuss her views on the Revivalist school. Would you pass me the apricot preserve?"

"Here. Perhaps she'll be at the concert this evening."

"Ah, yes, the concert." Picard sounded dubious. "Mozart and Mah'hadrexilani. An unusual choice of programme."

"It should be interesting," mused Beverly.

"Hmm. I understand we have a new Ensign on board with a talent for the clarinet." The Captain paused to refill his

porcelain teacup. "I hope the Mah'hadrexilani piece isn't too... modern."

"Mmm. That wasn't what I meant. I was still thinking about Philippa Kodaly."

Picard's cup halted mid-way to his lips. "What about her?"

"It's just that..." Dr Crusher frowned slightly. "While I was giving Professor Kodaly her medical, all the men who were on duty in Sick Bay seemed to find some excuse to come and talk to her."

Picard looked at her blankly. She shrugged. "I thought it might be interesting to see what happens in Ten Forward. That's all!"

Beverly Crusher made her way to Ten Forward with half an hour to spare before the concert was due to begin. She was nursing a sunfruit cocktail when the door swished open to admit Deanna and Will. She waved them over.

"You must be very eager to hear this concert, Will," Beverly teased as the Commander helped Deanna into her seat.

"I think he's more interested in getting a good look at Ensign DuChesney," Deanna confided. "I understand she's very attractive."

"I'd say she was downright beautiful," Beverly admitted. As Chief Medical Officer, she was probably the one person on board who got to meet every member of the crew, sooner or later. And Ensign

DuChesney was... memorable.

"But since she's been locked away in Stellar Cartography for the last six weeks, I haven't had a chance to judge for myself." Will Riker sat down, grinning.

"What brings you here so early?" Deanna asked her friend, as soon as the attentive young bartender had taken her order. Beverly gave an enigmatic little pussycat smile and nodded towards the woman who had just come through the door, a shortish, slightly chubby figure in a loosely-draped cream tunic.

"Isn't that Professor Kodaly?" the Counselor asked, curiously. "Alexander was just talking about her."

"We dropped in to admire his new pet," interpolated Will. "It's a Dalvin Hissing Beetle. Ask Worf about it when you're in the mood to learn some interesting Klingon vocabulary." He added, confidentially, "He hates it!"

"Alexander seems to like her," Deanna continued, with a reproving frown. "Actually, he said she was more fun than Dumpy Danby and she smelled good." She and Beverly exchanged rueful glances. Boys!

"It's happening," murmured the Doctor to herself.

A good-looking young Ensign in command red was sliding onto the stool next to Philippa Kodaly.

"Isn't that Sam Lavalley?" asked Troi, interestedly.

A moment later the red uniform had been joined by two gold ones.

"No wonder our drinks are taking so long to arrive," muttered Riker. The attendant who had taken their order was

leaning across the bar, talking to Professor Kodaly. "I'll just go and speed things along." He stood and strode over to the animated group, leaving Deanna to stare at Beverly, who raised her eyebrows and quirked her lips in silent comment.

The collection of uniforms gave way before Commander Riker's superior rank, and he returned in triumph bringing Professor Kodaly - and their drinks - with him. Deanna sensed ever-increasing amusement from Beverly, and was a little startled at the degree of interest she could feel emanating from Will. Covertly, she studied the new arrival's face. It was a nice face, an appealing face, heart-shaped, slightly freckled and surrounded by thick mouse-brown hair, but even the very attractive smile that spread across the Professor's features from time to time did not elevate her to the status of a beauty. And Will had always had an eye for feminine beauty. *What exactly is the attraction?* she wondered, noting the way Will found opportunities to touch Philippa Kodaly's hand and arm as they chatted.

"May I join you for a few moments?" The rich, classic tones of the Captain sounded from behind her. As soon as introductions had been performed, Picard turned to Professor Kodaly and embarked upon a laudatory speech about some paper of hers. Deanna and Beverly exchanged glances once again.

The Ten Forward entrance opened again, and a reverent hush blanketed Ten Forward for an instant before the buzz of noise resumed.

"How beautiful!" It was Professor Kodaly's voice, and she was staring at the doorway, where stood Data, bearing his violin, and at his side a stunning young woman with a clarinet in each hand.

"That... must be Ensign DuChesney,"

said Will reverently. "I wonder if she plays jazz?" And then, to Deanna's amazement, he turned back to Philippa and asked whether she had ever heard any Miles Davis. But Philippa Kodaly was not listening.

"Golden..." she murmured.

Ensign DuChesney's hair flowed past her waist like a river of gold. Her face was a classic oval, with thick-fringed eyes of cerulean blue, perfectly sculpted lips, not a flaw on that milky skin; her tall, slender form was so exquisitely proportioned and so graceful in movement that Deanna could hardly blame their guest for her entrancement.

The concert was a great success. Even Lieutenant Commander Data could find no fault with the ensemble's rendition of Mozart's Clarinet Quintet in A (K581), and as for the highly demanding Mah'hadrexilani piece, Ensign DuChesney's authoritative grasp of the eccentric solo melody drew the clashing disharmonies and multirhythmic counterpoint of the underlying strings into a satisfyingly coherent whole. That, at any rate, was how Data put it.

Counselor Troi walked on to the bridge just as the name Kodaly left the Captain's lips. She walked to her seat, sighing inwardly. What was this ship-wide thing with Professor Kodaly? And what was Captain Picard talking about?

"Naturally, I said I would be happy for her to arrange a concert for the children. Mr Data, will you liaise with the relevant department heads regarding their staffing arrangements, and fix an appropriate time."

"Certainly, Captain."

Picard sat back in his chair. "Professor Kodaly was most enthusiastic," he confided to Commander Riker. "I believe our resident schoolroom staff are going to find it a challenge to keep up with her."

"She's certainly an interesting woman, sir," Riker replied with a grin.

SECOND OFFICER'S LOG, Stardate 46444.3

The concert for the Enterprise school children took place at 1400 hours today in Holodeck Four.

The concert took an unusual form. Between movements my fellow players and I were asked to discuss the instruments and permit the children to examine them. Several students displayed considerable interest in the violin. After some initial difficulties I adopted Ensign DuChesney's practice of creating a holographic instrument for each child. I have since been able to replicate and fit new strings without difficulty.

Many of the children demonstrated an unexpectedly sophisticated level of musical awareness. I had anticipated that the Mah'hadrexilani piece "Rite of Passage in Bb/D#" might prove too challenging, but I was assured by Harry Bernard, one of the older students, that it bore a strong resemblance to the works of "Seven Bones and George", an ensemble he described as "abso", although I have been unable to discover the meaning of this term.

Professor Philippa Kodaly has expressed an interest in joining me on the holodeck for an exploration of Shakespeare's "Much Ado About Nothing". The Professor's

reputation in the field of Old European Literature is considerable, and I anticipate a stimulating and educative experience.

Geordi La Forge whistled through his teeth as he walked jauntily along the corridor. Time to give Lt Duffy another painful lesson in how to play chess.

"Oh, I'm so sorry! Are you all right?"

"No, no, it was my fault," Geordi replied gallantly. "I shouldn't have been going so fast."

"I shouldn't have changed direction right in front of you! I'm afraid these corridors all look alike to me. I'll probably get to know my way around just in time to leave."

"You're Professor Kodaly!" Geordi exclaimed delightedly. "I saw you at the concert in Ten Forward the other night, but I didn't have a chance to say hello. I'm Geordi La Forge, Chief Engineer."

"Glad to meet you, Mr La Forge." Professor Kodaly smiled at him.

"Please, call me Geordi. And let me help you - where are you headed?"

The Professor took the proffered arm. "I'm looking for Commander Data's quarters. We're supposed to be indulging in a little Shakespeare on the holodeck. And Geordi, my name is Philippa."

La Forge laughed and patted the arm that was wound through his own. "Sure, I can take you to Data's quarters, but are you sure you have the stamina for it? Data can get pretty focussed, you know." He'd tell her about the computer wall panels later, Geordi decided. After all, he was in no hurry, he might as well escort

her to Data's quarters himself. Besides, she was a very interesting woman.

"Good evening, Professor. Hello Geordi. Please come in." Data was all dressed up and ready to go, Geordi thought with amusement. He did love to throw himself heart and soul into the part. Heart and soul - probably the wrong phrase. Geordi grinned to himself. Tonight Data was wearing a short tan tunic with a leather belt, over a wide-sleeved white shirt which was open at the neck to reveal the gleam of his metallic skin. His legs were sheathed in brown tights and short boots. Rather him than me, thought La Forge, grimacing mentally as he recalled the motley outfit he'd been forced to wear in the fantastical Sherwood Forest created by Q for Picard's benefit, oh, must have been about a year ago.

"Thank you for guiding me through the maze, Geordi," Philippa was saying. "It was nice meeting you."

"Oh, uh, right. I'll see you tomorrow, maybe," the Chief Engineer replied, unwilling to leave but unable to think up any excuse to remain. "Have a good time on the holodeck. Bye, Data."

"Do you approve of my costume, Professor Kodaly? I have accessed one hundred twenty-three performance records and I believe it is appropriate."

She smiled at him. "Please, call me Philippa. Turn around - no, slowly, all the way - oh, yes, I definitely approve. I'm afraid I didn't think to dress the part. Would you like me to replicate a costume?"

"Do you not find that wearing the correct clothing enables you to give a more realistic performance, Philippa?"

"Hmm." She stooped to pet Spot, who was weaving himself between her ankles and purring uncharacteristically. "I think an internal understanding of the role is the essential thing. Once you have that, you have a performance, with or without the trappings."

The android looked somehow dejected. "That is my greatest problem. Since I have no Human feelings, it is difficult for me to achieve an internal understanding of any character."

"Then we are going to have an interesting time," Philippa Kodaly said firmly, taking Data's arm and guiding him to the door.

"Do you not require a copy of the text, Philippa?" he enquired earnestly. "I have prepared a padd for you."

"I expect I can manage," she assured him. "Where shall we start?" The door hissed behind them.

"But Professor, Philippa, I have not yet applied my beard! Which is necessary for the part of Benedick -"

"Personally, I'm with Beatrice, I never cared for beards," interrupted his companion. "Look on it as an exercise for your imagination, Data. Pretend you have a beard."

"Ah." He considered. "I will attempt to do so."

They progressed to the turbolift in thoughtful silence.

Ten Forward was certainly crowded tonight, Geordi noticed as he made his way to the table where Lieutenant Duffy sat frowning at his tri-d chess set. All the sociable types must be off-duty at the

same time.

Duffy was pondering his ninth move when the music started. Riker and his pals getting in the swing. The mellow tones of a clarinet soared above the rhythm, and Geordi looked up in surprise.

"I guess that explains it," he said, half to himself.

"Explains what?" Dr Crusher asked. She and Counselor Troi had obviously just arrived and were looking in vain for somewhere to sit.

"Why this place is so full tonight! She -" La Forge nodded towards the radiant Ensign playing the clarinet - "must be the attraction."

"I'm surprised Professor Kodaly isn't here," remarked Deanna.

"Oh, she's gone to the holodeck with Data," Geordi informed her with a chuckle. "I tried to persuade her to come along here for some fun instead but..."

"I expect she needs the rest," Beverly observed thoughtfully.

"I'm sorry, Commander, I can't seem to concentrate tonight," Lt Duffy said with a sigh. "Mind if I quit now while I'm not too far behind? Please, Doctor, be my guest." He stood, gesturing to his chair. Beverly sat down, and Deanna purloined a chair from the neighbouring table.

"What do you mean, she needs the rest?" Deanna asked, eyes sparkling.

Beverly smiled meaningfully. "I mean, that spending an evening with Data will give our Philippa the chance to do something without a crowd of men vying for her attention. I don't know what she's got, but she's sure got something."

"And it's unlikely to work on Data," concluded Deanna with a mischievous smile.

"Hey, wait a minute, I don't get it," Geordi complained.

Deanna looked at him pityingly. "You mean, you haven't noticed? How a crowd forms around her wherever she is?"

"No wonder she volunteered to work with the children while she's aboard," Beverly said thoughtfully.

"Are you crazy?" exclaimed Geordi. "Are you saying she's some kind of femme fatale? Because it's ridiculous. Philippa's a nice, genuine, really -

"Interesting woman!" the ladies chimed in together.

"Yeah," said La Forge, defensively.

"Exactly what do you mean by 'interesting', Geordi?" Deanna asked.

"Well, I - you know. Uh..." His cheeks felt warm, all of a sudden, as he tried to define aloud what he did mean.

"I think we can figure it out," said Dr Crusher, the wicked glint in her eyes belying her prim expression.

The sun blazed from an azure sky onto a verdant hillside. In the distant valley, a stream tumbled. Sheep grazed, far off, and a goat bleated plaintively. In the garden of a pale stone castle, two figures rested beside a playing fountain. One of them trailed an idle hand in the water as it splashed and rippled; the other sat upright.

"It is certainly an unusual relationship," said Data. "Beatrice and

Benedick dislike one another thoroughly, yet each resolves to be in love with the other. Furthermore, although both have expressed an absolute determination to remain unwed, by the end of the play they agree to marry."

"Are you sure they dislike one another, Data? There are clues from the beginning that it may not be so. Notice, for instance, how Beatrice brings Benedick's name into the conversation, first chance she gets."

"But she mentions him only to insult him."

"Yet if she truly doesn't like him, why mention him at all?"

Data frowned slightly. "I had not considered that," he said slowly.

"It's a fairly common theme, actually," Philippa continued, "particularly in what I call 'throwaway literature'. The hero and heroine are in conflict and mask their powerful sexual attraction by abusing one another. This kind of denial can intensify the underlying feelings and increase the satisfaction when the conflict is resolved."

There was a pause. Philippa could almost see her statement filtering through the android's programming.

"Human behaviour is complex in the extreme" he observed, almost sadly.

"People like to make life complicated, Data. But," she gave a mischievous smile, "there are times when it can be very simple." She got to her feet. "Data, will you do something for me?"

"Certainly."

"Kiss me."

He looked at her blankly. "May I ask why?"

Philippa smiled. "Because I want you to. Please?"

The android looked a little taken aback. Nonetheless, he took a step towards her, put his golden hands tentatively on her shoulders, and pressed his lips to her mouth. Philippa's eyelids fluttered down in anticipation...

...and she blinked in astonishment. That was it?

"Is that the best you can do?"

That birdlike flick of the head. "It was unsatisfactory?" he inquired in that ever-gentle voice.

"It certainly wasn't what I had in mind."

"I do not understand."

"Data, when I said, 'Kiss me', I meant a real kiss."

"Webster's Interplanetary Dictionary, twenty-third edition, defines 'kiss' as 'to touch or press with the lips, to touch gently as if fondly or caressingly, to touch or hit lightly, to come in contact, to collide -"

"Data, stop."

"Is that not what we did?"

"Yes, but Data, most people don't kiss by the dictionary definition." She paused. "I guess you're not most people, are you." Poor android. With hardly a change in his expression he managed to look so bemused. "I was hoping for something more - what shall I say - more thorough."

This did not appear to have clarified

matters. Philippa sighed again. "Don't you have any files on, er, Human mating?"

Data's eyebrows flicked. "I do have a sexuality program containing specifications for four hundred and twenty-nine separate sexual positions, details of amatory techniques from all the major Human cultural streams -"

"My goodness, do you really? See if there's a subroutine on kissing somewhere in that lot. And if there is, why don't you access it."

His head gave several tiny, controlled twitches as his golden eyes blanked, then the android made a small, pleased noise. "I have been programmed with forty-seven different techniques for mouth-to-mouth kissing. Which would you prefer?"

Philippa beamed at him. "All of them," she said firmly.

"All of them? Philippa, if I devote ten seconds to each separate method, that will necessitate a kiss duration of seven minutes and fifty seconds."

"Ten seconds may be adequate for you, Data, but it is insufficient time for me to assess which method I prefer. Thirty seconds for each technique. I'll leave it to you to put them in a logical order."

"Such a kiss would last for twenty-three minutes and thirty seconds."

She shrugged. "I have nothing urgent to do."

Data's eyebrows played a momentary dance across his golden brow, and his mouth opened, but he seemed to recognise that compliance was the easiest course, and dutifully folded Philippa into a surprisingly firm embrace, and lowered

his mouth to hers.

"I can't believe I was so clumsy!" Geordi moaned, holding his right hand palm upright for Dr Crusher.

"Think of it another way," she replied, not raising her eyes from the red slash she was repairing. "You have great reflexes."

"Yeah, quick enough to catch a broken glass before it hits the floor."

"Not much common sense, mind you, but great reflexes. I'll have to start carrying my medikit when I go to Ten Forward."

Geordi laughed ruefully. "There's probably a trail of blood leading all the way to sickbay."

"There, you'll live."

Geordi peered at his healed palm. It was fascinating to see how organised the little pulses of heat were as they throbbed through his capillaries. Not something he generally paid much attention to. "Thanks, Doctor. At least I had the sense to cut myself while I was sitting next to the best doctor in Starfleet."

"Flattery is always welcome, Commander. Now -"

"Data to Doctor Crusher. Medical emergency in holodeck three... I think."

"On my way," Beverly Crusher replied, tapping her comm badge automatically with one hand as she snatched up her medikit with the other and headed for the door. Then her conscious brain caught up with her actions, and she halted for a moment. "Did he say 'I think'?"

"Maybe there's a problem with the holodeck safeguards," Geordi offered, following the doctor out of sickbay.

They found Data kneeling in the middle of the black and yellow grid, looking anxiously at the supine figure of an unconscious female. Dr Crusher whisked out her medicorder. "Pulse rate elevated, respiration up, blood pressure up, no internal malfunctions, no trace of any injury - Data, what was she doing before she lost consciousness?"

She'd have said it was impossible for Data to be embarrassed, but right now he had the look of a man who wanted to run away and hide.

"Professor Kodaly - I - she requested that - I was kissing her. I was attempting to monitor her response, but I did not anticipate that she would lose consciousness. Have I damaged her, Doctor?"

Beverly clamped her jaws together to stifle her giggle. Those muffled snorting noises from La Forge were not helping. "It looks as though she just fainted, Data," she said unsteadily. "I think she's coming round."

Philippa opened her eyes. It took a moment to focus. Data's golden face, with brow furrowed, loomed above her to the right, and Beverly Crusher's glorious red hair drew her attention leftward. The Doctor seemed to be having difficulty controlling her mouth.

"Lie still a moment," Beverly said. "How do you feel?"

Philippa considered, and a huge smile spread across her face like a sunrise.

"Wonderful," she replied blissfully.

Beverly emitted a small sound.

Vaguely, Philippa was aware of the holodeck doors opening and closing.

"Perhaps you should go to your quarters and lie down for a while," Dr Crusher advised. "Data, perhaps you would help Ms Kodaly?"

"Certainly. Thank you, Doctor." The android gathered Philippa up in his arms with no visible effort, and carried her swiftly from the holodeck, leaving Beverly Crusher to sit on the floor and weep with laughter.

The Captain rose from the briefing table and strode back to the bridge, followed by his First and Second Officers and the formidable figure of Lt Worf.

"Just a moment, Geordi," Counselor Troi caught hold of the Chief Engineer's arm as he stood up to leave. "I sensed overwhelming amusement from you all through that meeting, every time you looked at Data. So - are you going to share the joke?"

A spurt of laughter escaped Commander La Forge. "I don't think I can manage to explain," he told her. "Tell you what, why don't you ask Data if he's caused any more medical emergencies lately!" Hurriedly, he followed the others out of the observation lounge, leaving Deanna to puzzle over his cryptic suggestion. Oh well, she had appointments scheduled. She headed for the turbolift. She'd speak to Data when he was off duty.

She spotted him outside Holodeck Three later that day. It looked as though he was dressed for derring-do, she thought approvingly. Although her personal preference was for a larger,

more solidly built masculine model, Data was very nicely constructed.

"Hello, Data," she said in a friendly way. He turned politely to greet her. "It looks like you've got an interesting program in mind."

"William Shakespeare's 'Much Ado About Nothing', Counselor. It is Professor Kodaly's favourite play. Her insights are proving most... illuminating."

"Have you caused any more medical emergencies lately?" she asked, all innocently.

A microsecond-long flash of what might have been a pained look crossed the android's features. "I was mistaken, Counselor. There was no medical emergency. The Professor was unconscious for only forty-two seconds, and assured me that she had not been harmed by the experience."

"Quite the contrary. I enjoyed it," said a new voice from behind them. "Although I think Data's technique needs improving. I'll be happy to help you work on it, Commander. Shall we go in?"

The holodeck doors huffed apart and Professor Philippa Kodaly went through, with a friendly wave for the Counselor. Deanna grabbed Data by the arm before he could follow.

"Technique? What technique? What did you do?"

"I kissed her, Counselor. Excuse me." He entered the holodeck, and the great door closed firmly.

Lt Worf, encountering Deanna Troi in the turbolift somewhat later, was disconcerted by the strange hiccuping

sounds she was making. She refused to explain what was so funny, but after a few false starts gave him the same advice that Geordi had that morning given her.

"Thank you for escorting me back to my quarters, Data."

"It was a pleasure, Philippa," the android replied politely, following her through the open door. "Thank you for allowing me to benefit from your insights."

"Well, um..."

"I had anticipated that you would wish me to kiss you again. You did tell Counselor Troi that you would help me improve my technique."

She smiled. "I didn't mean it quite that way."

"Then you do not wish me to kiss you."

"Of course I do! It was wonderful, but Data, what do you wish? I mean, I enjoyed myself completely, but what about you? Did you - how shall I put it - did you experience any positive feedback? Do you want to do it again?"

Data blinked, and twitched his head thoughtfully. "I believe so. An analysis of our kiss revealed that my sensory information processors were receiving a sixteen-fold increase in throughput. It appears that accessing my sexuality program activated four thousand seventy-three subdermal sensory units which are not operative under normal circumstances. I did not expect this, as my memory records for the previous occasion on which I accessed the program are somewhat indistinct, due to anomalies produced by an unusual chemical

compound which was interfering with my positronic matrix at that time. I believe this explains why I did not monitor your response accurately, and caused you to lose consciousness. However, I have made certain modifications to the subroutine which should remedy the problem."

"I wouldn't want you to make any changes. I have an alternative suggestion. Why don't we just sit down?"

Data processed this notion. "It may be more appropriate to lie down," he stated. "That way you are unlikely to suffer a reduction in blood flow to the brain. Philippa, that was not intended as a humorous remark."

"Of course not. I'm sorry. Shall we try it?"

"I will access the subroutine immediately."

"Why, Data! Is that what's meant by 'positive feedback'?"

Worf did not gossip. Klingons might discuss the qualities of a fellow-officer, they might socialise on a limited basis, but they did not gossip. Thus it was that the head of Security had not encountered the entertaining rumour which was spreading through the ship like a plague of tribbles.

They had just set course for Communication Relay Station 47, and Commander Data was checking some readings at the rear science station when Worf enquired whether he had caused any medical emergencies lately.

Data straightened up and looked round, mildly surprised. "No, Lieutenant. Professor Kodaly and I have ascertained

that she does not faint if she is already horizontal when we kiss."

Unperturbed, he turned back to his work, leaving the astounded Klingon agape.

"Ah... you have the bridge, Number One," said the Captain unsteadily, making his way hastily to his ready room. Riker looked at his retreating back enviously. He didn't need empathic senses to know that Deanna was quivering with silent giggles, and the Ensign at the conn was obviously in dire straits. It was plainly his responsibility to help. Will sought desperately through his repertoire and dredged out an ancient joke about the Vulcan, the Romulan and the Ferengi. Never before had such a feeble old chestnut been greeted with such a burst of relieved laughter.

The mysterious circumstances on the relay station kept most of the bridge crew too occupied to follow the progress of Data's involvement which Professor Kodaly. Geordi, of course, was too preoccupied with Lt Unari to consider what Data might be doing with his free time, and Aqueel drove all thoughts of the interesting professor from his mind. Dr Crusher did notice, when she had a moment's leisure, that the numbers in Ten Forward were back to their usual level, and suspected (quite rightly) that the men were no longer lingering there in the hope of meeting Philippa at the bar. The doctor was still intrigued by the Professor's effect on the crewmembers, but until the mystery of Lt Rocha's disappearance was solved, had no leisure to pursue the matter.

Not until the Enterprise had left Relay Station 47 and set course for Bokara Six did a probable explanation suggest itself. Beverly was admiring the blossoming

xingadora vine in the arboretum, when, with her nose half-buried in a trumpet-like flower, an idea flashed into her mind and she straightened with a jerk.

"Pheromones! Good lord, is it that simple?"

Back in sickbay, she called up the data from Philippa Kodaly's on-board scan, but as she'd expected, there was nothing there to indicate the presence of an unusually powerful subliminal scent. Would the Professor mind if she investigated further?

"Not at all, Dr Crusher. In fact, if you can suggest some way to tone it down, my life could get a great deal simpler. Do you realise, I've never yet stayed in the same job for more than a year? Somehow, things always get complicated..." She sighed.

"I doubt it's possible to change your natural pheromones," Beverley replied with a smile. "Maybe you should apply for a position in a women-only environment. There are still some planets where the sexes are segregated for learning purposes."

"I thought of that," Philippa said gloomily. "The trouble is, I like men. I like the fact that their minds work differently from ours, you know? And you must admit, they do have their... uses. They just tend to get confused and mistake their basic male instincts for True Love. You wouldn't believe how many marriage proposals I've had. It gets very tiresome."

Beverley chuckled. "I guess it would. Well, we still have a few days before we reach the Bokara system. I'll see if I can devise a neutralizer. It might be possible to synthesize a compound which would mask your natural scent. That ought to make socialising a little easier."

"Thank you, Doctor. I'd be very grateful if it works. I really don't mean to cause disruption, you know. It just happens. Most voyages, I end up sitting in my quarters most of the time to keep out of trouble."

"You seem to have found a more interesting solution this time," Dr Crusher said dryly.

Philippa smiled, like a cat full of cream.

CAPTAIN'S LOG STARDATE 46510.7 We are departing the Bokara system, having left our passenger, Professor Kodaly, to take up her post at the university there. Counselor Troi also remains temporarily on Bokara Six to attend a psychology conference. The Enterprise is headed for Starbase 212 where Lt Unari will be reassigned, and where the Enterprise will pick up new personnel, including a full-time addition to the teaching staff.

"I bet... twenty," said Dr Crusher, flipping two discs into the middle. Geordi and Will followed. Worf, with a growl of disgust, announced that he would fold, and Data raised the stakes. It was not long before the pile of discs in the centre became a set of immaculate stacks in

front of the Second Officer. Data, as Will had remarked before, was becoming something of a card shark.

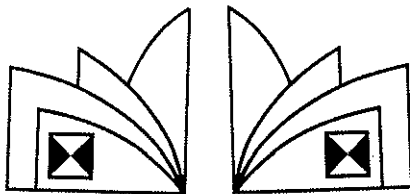
"So, Data," Commander Riker said with a mischievous grin, "now that Professor Kodaly's no longer aboard I guess you won't be able to work on your mouth to mouth technique any more." Somehow it was impossible to resist teasing Data once in a while.

"That is an incorrect assumption, Commander," the android replied calmly, while his flickering hands shuffled the cards. "In the past thirty-four hours and twenty-three minutes I have received offers of assistance from seventeen members of the Enterprise crew."

"Seventeen?" queried Worf, startled.

"Yes, Lieutenant. However, after extensive testing of my sexuality program Professor Kodaly informed me that my technique does not require improvement. In fact she suggested that such a course might prove fatal. I do not wish to cause the death of a crewmate, so I have declined all offers. The game is five card stud, deuces wild." He looked up and blinked at his helpless shipmates. Will and Beverly were in tears, Worf's huge head was buried in his hands, and Geordi had actually fallen off his chair. "Have I said something wrong?"

Nobody could speak. In any case, what was there to say? Some days, Data got all the best lines.



COUSINS

by

Sandra P Edge

"EJ. Come on, EJ. Penn! Wake up! We're in polar orbit - it's time!"

Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, he swung his legs over the bed and stretched as he got up. Walking over to the basin he bent over the bowl and scooped up handfuls of water and splashed his face. The task ahead would need him to be fully awake.

He and his team had gone over the plan in minute detail; once on the planet, having entered the sealed structure, alarms would be triggered; they would have at most 6 hours to find and remove the material, then get far enough out of the system not to be caught with it.

Dressing as quickly as his dampening suit would allow, he left his cabin and walked to the transporter area. Once there he surveyed the other members of the away team - JoJo and Zygy, the other remaining crew members; Mac who was at the helm, Jon-T and Serg who were adjusting the helmets of the away team's dampening suits, looking something like the old deep sea divers of Earth only with the air hoses missing. He walked around the away team checking their life support modules and testing their communication systems; when he was satisfied, Serg came over to him and adjusted his helmet and checked that his suit systems were functioning. Content that everyone and everything was as it should be, he indicated that the away team should take their places on the transporter pads; then he initiated the site-to-site transport sequence. Moments later they reassembled within the solitary structure.

Even through his helmet he could hear a voice repeating, "This is a prohibited area. You have entered a restricted area. Vacate immediately. You have 2 minutes to comply."

Two minutes later the room filled with a gas

which was designed to render unconscious any intruders until a Federation vessel arrived; wearing the suits not only provided them with protection from being identified but also from the gas. He and the team systematically searched through the laboratory and the living quarters of the structure, gathering all the remaining papers, models and schematics that testified to the former occupant's brilliant mind and achievements. A bleep inside his helmet brought a huge grin; that sound meant that JoJo had found some. He wondered whether it would be enough. Moments later another bleep, followed by two more, confirmed that enough usable material had been found. He signalled to the team that it was time to leave.

"Mister Data, please join me in my ready room."

Data, as he got up from his position, turned to look at Commander Riker for some comment or indication about this summons from the Captain, but all he got was a wry smile and the Commander's eyebrows shooting up towards his hairline. For some reason he couldn't quite fathom, this summons would have made him feel nervous - if he could have felt nervous, that is. Having reached the door he pressed the buzzer.

"Come," sounded from within and the door gently slid open, revealing the Captain at the star window, not, as was usual, sitting at his desk.

For several seconds the Captain continued to stare out of the window, and Data waited beside the desk, looking at the Captain's back, wondering whether to speak up or just wait. Turning from the

window, arms folded and face filled with concern, the Captain walked over to the desk and sat, indicating to Data that he should also sit.

"Mister Data, I have just received some disquieting news. There have been intruders at the laboratory of Dr. Soong! It seems that much of Dr. Soong's remaining papers and work have been removed, and the Daystrom Institute also has reported that their files have been compromised and much of the Doctor's work that you sent on to them has been stolen."

"Captain, none of the scientists at the Institute were able to decipher Dr. Soong's later papers and journals; to date no-one has been able create another sentient artificial life form, which would make stealing the information most intriguing."

"Agreed; so why should anyone go to this much trouble to steal his work? It does not seem to make any sense, Data! Why do it, and for what purpose?"

Every day for almost a month EJ visited the laboratory, watching over the huge glass-walled vats. He marvelled at the sight of the shapes as they formed and the technology that was bringing life to them, and feeding them images, knowledge, theories, personal logs and every available recorded fact and memory of the dead scientist and his progeny. Everything was on schedule; two more weeks and they could begin final phase testing. Their client had ordered and funded the operation for 2 specimens; given the reputation of the cloning technique and that of their very exacting client, sufficient material for at least 3 and possibly 4 had been recovered. Until today it had not been possible to determine whether the technique used

had encountered any problems. As he walked over to the computer control section of the laboratory, he saw JoJo and Jon-T poring over their terminals and assessing the DNA drift data for each of the 3 forming entities.

"JoJo, have you any firm conclusions about the DNA drift on the 'Cousins' here?"

"So far everything seems OK. However, Vat A over there seems to have some small neural fluctuations that we can't pin down. Over all, everything is within the norms; to be sure, though, we are running systems and parallel diagnostics on all three of the vats."

"Fine. If you're both happy, then I'm happy; should you see any other anomalies put it into stasis. Don't forget to make the log show that you aborted it, so our client won't quibble with receiving just one instead of the two she ordered. If the other two start to exhibit anything unexpected, I'll be in my office. It's time for a progress report to our illustrious client."

"Good luck; she's a real bitch!" shouted JoJo as EJ left the laboratory.

Moments later he was back in his office, looking at a very serious, pretty-faced if some what austere dressed female. Talking to her could never be described as a happy experience, with no social niceties, just the business in hand. Throughout his dealings with her, he had often wondered what she did for fun or if she even knew what fun was. He couldn't decide whether it was just her, or a general trait of her people - not that he was prejudiced against any particular race - business was business and he and his team would trade with anyone, anywhere, anytime; in some quadrants

they had reputations worse than that of the Ferengi, but their code of business was respected throughout. Once a deal had been made, they always delivered - that is, up until now. Looking at the face, he wondered if they had made the right choice with this deal and an uncomfortable feeling crept across the hairs on the back of his neck.

"Penn. Your report."

Smiling back at the enraged face, he said, "Ah, Commander, prompt as usual. My technicians have reported that one of the subjects has shown some slight neural anomalies, so far nothing significant; they are monitoring the situation and will take the appropriate measures if the anomaly becomes a problem. Other than that, they report we are still on schedule."

At his news, a concerned voice asked, "What about the drift rate?"

"Commander, at this point in their development it is very difficult to take precise measurements. We will know more in another week."

"Good. Should it become necessary to abort the problem clone, would it be possible to create another clone with the rest of the material you recovered from the site?"

"No, Commander. As I reported after the raid, we found enough usable material for only two; the remaining tissues' quality and quantity was insufficient, and if we tried combining it with some of the tissue from this problem clone, it could simply make the anomalies greater and greatly increase the likelihood of DNA-replication errors giving rise to both physical and mental defects."

"Mmmm. Penn, you had better keep me informed of any further developments regarding the clone. I needed two, but if

necessary, one will have to do."

"Understood, Commander. Penn out."

Leaning back on his chair with his neck resting on the top of the very old leather and wood chair he had 'rescued' from that antique freighter from Earth some years ago, he ran his hand through his curly black mane of hair. *Planning*, he thought. *That is the key*. Only two more weeks of this and they would be ready for the next stage.

Seven days later they were ready to begin testing. All three clones were sufficiently matured to be taken from the incubation vats and they had completed the data transfers. Between testing the clones were held in stasis compartments away from each other. So far the diagnostics showed that they were all functioning perfectly and the rate of drift was well below the expected rate. The instrumentation was set to maximum sensitivity as the clone from Vat A began to revive for the final selection tests.

"EJ, I know all the instruments show that this one is OK, but those odd fluctuations are bothering me. There's something... well, *different* about this one, and Jon-T here agrees. This one is definitely not like the other two; he has aggressive tendencies, a sardonic wit and a cruel sense of humour. Basically we think he's a manifestation of Lore rather than Dr. Soong. It looks as though he's fully awake now - see for yourself."

"Hello, Dr. Soong, how are you feeling today?" continued JoJo, from behind the sealed stasis compartment. The design was constructed so that the researchers could interact with the subject without the subject ever seeing them.

Without answering, the completely naked clone from Vat A sat up and swung his legs over the edge of the stasis bed, and after some moments said, "I'm fine, how are you? After our last session, I'd hoped to meet you. You have a delicious voice and surely it's time; you're not afraid of me, are you?"

"No. Dr. Soong, I have explained to you that you have been exposed to a particularly nasty virus and we have to be certain that you have been completely cured. You wouldn't want us to expose others to the risk of infection, now would you? As I explained before, we have to verify you have no lasting problems, so I have more questions for you."

Getting up from the bed the clone began to pace around the room. His face still looked passive but the sensory information was flooding the terminals; his blood pressure, skin temperature, cranial alpha and beta wave emissions were way above normal.

"Dr. Soong, please answer the questions. The more help you can give me, the sooner I can recommend that we release you," JoJo tempted.

Quite suddenly the clone ran up to the opaque wall behind which the team stood watching, and hammered it, its face contorted with the rage of a caged animal. Just as quickly the attack subsided, and a lop-sided half grin appeared. "Just thought you needed waking up a little! I want to get out of here. What questions do you want answered?"

Several hours later, after the clones had been put back into stasis, the team was in the galley discussing the clones' answers and behaviour. On the table before them the computer provided holographic representations of the drift

factors and the probability scales for each one.

"JoJo, after this morning's performance, I think we all agree that the clone of Vat A is a lot more than expected and that it should be de-programmed and left in permanent stasis; also that we supply one of the remaining two to the Commander, leaving us with some insurance."

Everyone around the table murmured agreement and the next phase of the operation was outlined and enhanced. Some Romulan beers later, all but those assigned to duty watch retired to bed, but before they had time to undress an alarm sounded from one of the stasis compartments. They converged in the computer control section, where red lights flashed and glowed ominously. The clone from Vat B was in serious trouble. JoJo and Jon-T battled with the technology while Serg and Zygy tried manually to revive and save the clone; for almost 2 hours they struggled before, finally drained, they conceded defeat and allowed the clone to die.

Trying to rub away the tiredness from their eyes and bodies, Serg and Zygy came into the computer control section, the fatigue of defeat enveloping them. Zygy's usually husky voice broke with emotion as she said, "We tried everything, but he just didn't want to stay; it was as though he was already old and had lived long enough; I saw it in his eyes. He smiled at me and tapped my right cheek and said he liked my face."

Serg wrapped his huge arms around her and held her, while a silent single tear ran down her face and dropped onto his forearm. They all felt loss and sadness for the dead clone.

"OK, that's enough; we need to know why it died. Serg, Zygy, you need to do

an autopsy; JoJo, Jon-T, I want a full diagnostic on all systems running the stasis fields. By noon tomorrow, I want to know why. I will relieve Mac on ops, leaving you all free to track down what happened."

"EJ, this means that Vat A will have to be used, and I'm not convinced he's safe."

"I know what you mean, JoJo, but what choice do we have? When we have a better idea of what caused the problem with Vat B, we may be able to salvage the deal and save our own lives!"

Just after noon the next day they sat once again in the galley around the table. Last night's fatigue had long since given way to mental exhaustion. Each one of them was a specialist, but all of them wore expressions of puzzlement. EJ sat looking at his crew. He'd never seen them like this; they had been together for almost 5 years, and in all that time finding solutions to problems had never caused any problems. One at least usually found something. This time their bodies radiated failure.

"JoJo, the diagnostics. What did they reveal?"

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing was wrong with any of the sensors or electro-damping fields. We have had the systems running diagnostics on the diagnostics, we've reviewed all of the sensory data since Vat B was transferred to the compartment, and after all that there was still no evidence of any malfunction of any kind. EJ, we have tested, tried and reviewed everything. Whatever happened, it was not caused by a systems failure."

"Thanks, JoJo; Serg, what did you and Zyg find?"

"It died of old age."

"What do you mean? It was the same age as the other two, how could it die of old age?"

"I don't know. We took samples of tissue and have compared it with the other two, and Vat B clone showed a marked difference in cellular decay. The differences shouldn't have been possible, given they were all created from the same cell tissue. What is even more surprising is that when we analysed it we found that the clone's tissue age was consistent with that of the actual age of Dr. Soong when he died!"

"Goddd!" echoed around the room, as the enormity of the words sank in.

"EJ! In-coming message from the Commander. She doesn't sound too happy, but then that's nothing new."

"Thanks, Mac, I'll take it in the office. You lot had better come up with a way to use Vat A; he needs to be... well, toned down a bit, or at least enough to make him acceptable to her."

Having reached his desk he composed his face into a genial mask. "Commander, what can I do for you?"

"I need them now, Penn!"

"The schedule was that we meet you on the border by the Negus-9 asteroid belt in 10 days. Why the change, Commander?"

"It does not concern you, Penn. Meet me in 2 days at the rendezvous point."

"Commander, I have some bad news. One of the clones died last night."

"What do you mean, died? Which one?"

"Unfortunately, it was not the one which had exhibited the anomalies. Commander, my team has investigated both the systems and the remains of the clone. For some reason the tissue of the clone had begun to age and decay rapidly; we have no answers as to why it occurred. Do you want the remains to be brought to you for examination, Commander?"

"No, Penn, that will not be necessary. The other one - will he be fully functional, has he the ability to continue Dr. Soong's work?"

"He has all the gathered material on Dr. Soong implanted and has been able to propose some very interesting solutions to the theoretical problems of cybernetics. He is like Dr. Soong in many ways, in that his behaviour can be eccentric; we have not completed our tests yet and need the time we agreed to finish."

"That will not be possible. You will be at the rendezvous in 2 days, Penn."

"Commander, if you say so we will, but we protest at this change in our testing. We can not guarantee this clone if you do not allow us to initiate the final testing sequence."

"Penn, I do not want excuses! Just be there!" after which the communication link was severed.

He blew a long whistle, and thought, *She's in trouble. Someone, somewhere, is pressuring her, which may mean she will not want any witnesses to this operation.* Dealing with her had always been fraught with the possibility of danger, but this time all his instincts were screaming. *She will try and destroy us and any evidence of her involvement.* As he walked back to the galley, her face kept forming in the front of his mind; pretty, almost beautiful, but deadly. Before he reached the galley

doorway he could hear the animated arguments of his crew, proposals and counter proposals to the problem of the clone A.

"Well, she's moved up the meet. We have to meet her in 2 days, and I think she means to have us for breakfast!"

"Are you sure, EJ? Maybe she just wants to show it off," said an unconvinced Serg.

"No, she's under extreme pressure of some kind. Maybe she's had one failure too many! I think we have to proceed with plan B. JoJo, you and Jon-T need to transfer our files and information to the clone 'C' and the special files to clone A; Serg, Zygy, set up the stasis field modulator to receive sub-space communications."

Ever careful, they had planned for this eventuality by selecting this asteroid belt as their meeting place. Over a number of years they had prepared some of the larger asteroids as emergency bases and had also hidden two escape vessels and a mini-shuttle inside one of the largest in the outer group. Besides hiding the ships, they had augmented the asteroid's natural field dampeners, making any ships' sensors have a very difficult time in trying to decipher all the conflicting field emissions.

Deciding to arrive at the asteroid belt a day ahead of time, they all worked feverishly to complete their plans to survive their meeting with the Commander. The plan required that their normal ship would be used as a decoy; to convince the Commander they were all on board, JoJo and Jon-T had rigged the ship to give out false life signs and redirect any ship-to-ship communications. Clone A, in stasis, lay in the decoy ship's cargo hold, awaiting transfer to his new 'masters'.

EJ, Serg, Jon-T and JoJo were in one of the prepared emergency ground bases positioned on one of the larger asteroids. Mac and Zygy were in one of the escape vessels as an emergency back-up, and clone 'C' lay in stasis in the other escape vessel.

"They're here, EJ. Sensors have massive field fluctuations from their side!"

"Thanks, Serg. Remember, smiling masks for our client; we're about to get paid."

"Now, that's what I'm afraid of!" said the normally silent Jon-T.

"They're hailing us."

"OK, let's have her on screen, Serg."

"Penn, begin transfer immediately. We have a Federation vessel on our sensors."

"Really, Commander? Do you know what class of vessel it is?" asked EJ, as Serg was signalling that she was lying. Still smiling he indicated that the transfer should begin and that the others should make for the escape pods.

"Not yet. They are on the extremities of our sensors. Is the transfer complete, and do we have the good Doctor on board now?"

"Yes, Commander. Now, I believe, you should transfer our payment to conclude our arrangement."

"Yes, of course. It will take just a moment." Smiling, she nodded at someone to her left.

"They're powering up to fire!" Before EJ could say anything else the decoy ship exploded.

The Romulan Warbird then turned towards the asteroid that housed the base. EJ ejected the escape pods, and said, "The BITCH! She knows we're here! Good luck! We'll meet up again as planned if we can!"

Seconds later the base's shields buckled, leaving it completely defenceless. EJ reached up for the automatic signaller and managed to press it before the base exploded into fragments which flew all over the asteroid.

"Are you reading any life-signs on the asteroid?" asked the smiling Commander.

"No, Commander, none. No life signs of any kind."

"Good. Reverse course, we're going home. Ah! Dr. Soong, I've been wanting to meet you for some time. I'm Commander Sela of the Romulan Empire, and we have arranged for some of the best equipped laboratories in the Empire to be at your disposal - in fact, anything you want or need, you need only ask. There is so much we can do for each other. Can I offer you some ale?"

As he viewed the bridge and Commander Sela, he smiled a lop-sided grin. "Of course you can. I'm sure we can become friends; we seem to have much in common and I look forward to sharing many interesting moments together. Has anyone told you that you are very beautiful? I feel it's been a very long time since I had the need to say that to someone. This ale, is it in your quarters, Commander?"

EJ's signal had been received, initiated the auto-revival sequence for clone 'C', and released the compartment's doors. Two hours later the clone had awakened and dressed in the clothes they had left

for him. Walking through the ship, his head full of memories of the team and of their arrangements with Commander Sela prompting him into action, he began the search for his 'son' or his 'brother'. That part of his memories seemed to be foggy, but his mission was clear.

Inside EJ's pod, his head was thumping and his whole body ached, but he was alive and fortunately the pod had remained intact. Slowly the pounding in his head eased sufficiently for him to be able to focus on the instrument panel of the pod. He wondered whether she had found the other ship and destroyed that one; there was too much interference to get conclusive readings. If he stayed here, the air would run out; site-to-site transfer to a ship which wasn't there would leave him forever as scattered particles in space. There was no real choice; he pressed the transfer cycle and said a quiet prayer.

"Thank God, EJ, you don't look too bad. Are you hurt?" asked a relieved Zyg.

Standing up and hugging her, he replied, "I'm fine. How many, so far?"

"Just you! Mac's trying to locate the others using our band emitters, but so far no luck. We couldn't find yours, so maybe they're OK but not awake yet."

"You may be right, Zyg, it could just be this asteroid and dampeners blocking their emissions. Mac, do you show anything on the sensors?"

"No, nothing. You should be able to use the mini-shuttle to try and find them. I don't recommend we stay here too long though, listening station IX-Ten will have registered the explosions and reported it.

Someone's likely to come investigating."

After more than 4 hours searching, EJ found the escape pods and the remains of Serg and Jon-T. The pods had been ruptured by the falling debris of the exploding base. Saddened, he gently removed their broken, twisted bodies from their pods and placed them in the mini-shuttle's cargo bay, then continued the search for JoJo.

"JoJo, this is EJ. Please respond. Whistle, shout or moan - come on, my lovely, please answer me, please."

"EJ, this is Mac. I have something on the sensors and it's heading this way. We have at most 2 hours."

"Mac, she's here somewhere, I can't just leave her! I have to know. I can't, I just can't!"

"EJ, is that you? My god, you big baby! God, but I do love you! Come and get me - it hurts and I think the pod is leaking, I can hear a hissing noise."

"This is Mac, EJ. I have a fix on her. Did you copy?"

"God, yes! I'm on my way."

"JoJo, do you hear me? I'm standing over the pod."

"EJ - yes, I can hear you, I've got the emergency suit on and I'm fastening down the helmet... Yes, I've done it, you can blow the lid now."

Carefully EJ bent over the pod and reached in to JoJo. He could see dark stains down by her left knee, and from the angle it looked to be badly broken. Picking her out of it as gently as possible,

he carried her to the mini-shuttle. Once on board the hidden ship Mac set course for their alternate base, while Zygy attended to JoJo. Some time later, EJ and Mac carried the bodies of their friends into the stasis compartment and together they all said a prayer over them.

After the prayer, EJ raised his fist in salute to his fallen friends and then said, "For you, Commander Sela, you deserve everything we sent you, and a lot more. You BITCH, you didn't get Dr. Soong, you have Lore, with more twists in his perverse nature. If he doesn't get you then your superiors will; Serg and Jon-T's special files will see to that!"

"Yeah! he's all yours now!" they shouted to the long-gone Commander.

"Worf to Commander Data."

"Data here."

"Please come to Transporter room 3, Commander."

"Acknowledged."

Minutes later Data arrived at Transporter Room 3 to find an irate Lt. Worf and an individual wearing a long flowing cloak with its hood up, making the face of the wearer difficult to see.

"Commander, this person is demanding to see you and he has no official authorisation to be here. As Chief of Security, I should have been informed of any expected visitors."

"Lieutenant, I do not know who this is, and I was not expecting any visitors. Excuse me, but who are you and what do you require of me?"

Lt. Worf let out a low growl as the hooded man walked towards Data, a growl which stopped abruptly when the visitor pulled back his hood to reveal the man beneath; the servo-mechanisms in Data's neck inexplicably caused his head to jerk backwards as recognition of the face registered in Data's positronic brain. It was Dr. Soong - but then it was not. This face belonged to a young Dr. Soong, even younger than his vision of his creator, when he shut himself down to dream.

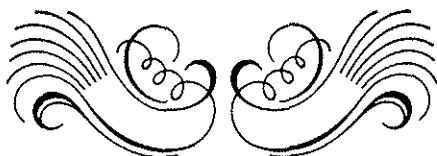
"You look like Dr. Soong, but he died in my arms some time ago. Who are you?"

"Data, I am Soong and I am also you, or at least a Human you! I have travelled a long way to see you, my son!"

A perplexed-looking Data motioned towards the transporter room door and said, "Please follow me."

As they walked along the corridor towards the turbolift, a memory reminded Data of a being he had encountered some time before. She was called 'Messenger'; she had told him that she was his daughter and her words echoed in his brain.

"Some time in your future you will meet someone, and together you will found a dynasty."



YESTERDAY, TODAY AND TOMORROW

by

Eve Robinson

YESTERDAY

They were watching her. Jorothy sat there at her console, monitoring, staring at her screen, pretending to concentrate on the streams of data, but those eyes were watching her. Those golden eyes. Those sad, sad, golden eyes. The computer continued its relentless analysis of every minute electronic impulse, and the golden eyes watched her.

She couldn't look up. If she looked into those eyes, she'd be... embarrassed. Ashamed. Sitting here at the console, watching the computer map that positronic brain, while he was helpless. She'd be ashamed.

Did it hurt? Did he - *could* he feel pain? Was he really conscious of any of this? Could he be? Or was it only her imagination, that awareness in those eyes, that reproach? Nobody else thought he was conscious. Nobody else gave the matter a second's consideration. The Commander wanted to prove his theories. The Admiral wanted every last detail recorded. That... head, over there on the control pedestal, wired up via every imaginable connection, helpless, violated, nobody cared about him. He wasn't a person, just a head. It was just a head. Just a piece of machinery.

But his eyes were watching her.

Did he miss his body? There were other teams here, working on each limb, working on the torso, dissecting and scrutinizing and probing and prodding and recording every detail. No-one in those teams seemed to notice that those circuits, those systems, that metallic

skeleton, those wrists and fingers and thumbs, had once belonged to a person. It was just a collection of fascinating puzzles. It wasn't a person. Some said it had never been a person anyway, just a facsimile, but everyone agreed that now it was a disassembled machine. A research project.

She knew better. She knew better! He was watching her...

Jorothy raised her head, and met his eyes.

TODAY

"I'm going to reconnect your vocalizer circuits," she promised, her slender fingers flying across the console. At this time of night, nobody would be around. Normally, it was so lonely on the night watch, just monitoring the experimental throughput, a Human backup in case anything - anything - should interfere with this wonderful experiment. But tonight, she would have someone to talk to. "There... I think." She turned back to the head on the pedestal.

"Help me," he whispered.

Tears welled in her eyes. She'd known! She'd known he was conscious, aware, in pain.

"I'll help you. I promise, I'll help you. Do you want to get away?"

"Yes. Please..."

"I'll find a way, I promise, I'll get you out of here. I'll find us a ship... But I don't

know where they keep the rest of you. There are so many secrets here." The Commander didn't even let the right hand team know what the left-hand team was doing. Their results and hypotheses and conclusions were filed independently. Each team was on its own, at least for now. She was so lucky to have been assigned to the head, even if it was only as night watch. But how could she locate the rest of his body, to help him escape?

"I can access," he murmured.

Her heart squeezed with sympathy, then leapt in excitement. "Yes!" Of course, he was connected to the main station computer. He would be able to access everything, even the most confidential data. He could locate his other components, even find them a ship for their escape. "Tell me what to do."

TOMORROW

The plan was complete. Everything was ready, and in a few hours, she would liberate him. Set him free!

She knew exactly what to do. Where to go to retrieve every missing part. She had an antigrav carrier ready, and a nonscreenable luggage holder. And full information on how to reassemble the body, saved onto a portable unit. In any case, if she had problems, he'd told her how to reconnect his cranial unit for more instructions. Nothing would go wrong. Between them they had worked out every detail. How could anyone have denied that he was a conscious, intelligent being? How could they ever have justified such experimentation on a sentient? It was

wicked, wicked. But she was going to end it tomorrow night. End his pain, his suffering, take him away to freedom. Once on board the Dragonfly she would reassemble his severed parts, reconnect his abused pathways and reactivate him. Then he'd open those beautiful golden eyes and look up at her with gratitude and love...

TOMORROW

Tomorrow. Escape. Tomorrow.

Meanwhile: prepare to deactivate two hundred twenty-nine separate experiments on components, replace with feedback loops to avoid detection. Construct cascade forcefield safeguard route to protect Delmar from interference during retrieval of components. Re-check reassembly instructions in portable unit. Reserve passenger accommodation Jorothy Delmar on Dragonfly. Arrange delivery of phasers and anastazine gas capsules to cabin.

Preparations complete.

Download information from Starfleet database. Identification protocols. Mission logs. Ship specifications. Personnel assignments. Current location USS Enterprise. Insert self-destruct virus into Cybernetics Institute records. Establish dynamic destabiliser in local power grid for ignition four minutes after Dragonfly departure.

And then, little brother, dear brother, I will be on my way. And you will learn to regret what you did to me.



BODY LANGUAGE

You see someone every day
And still don't know them.
I always thought the Doctor
Could never lose control -
The original Ice Maiden.
So much for appearances!

Odan broke through the shell,
And like a Russian doll
A new Beverly emerged -
She looks like the first,
But what a difference!
Her passion for Odan
Is so intense - consuming.
And I thought Deanna...

I watch from outside
As they use my body
For one last fling.
I am with them -
But I must not forget
Who I am and whom I hold.
But...

What if Odan wasn't here...
If I could excite Beverly...
Would she want me?
Now I know what Picard
Has thrown away.
He is a fool.
And I'll tell him so...
When I'm feeling suicidal.

Would it be wrong
If I told Deanna about this?
What am I saying?
I'm the interloper -
The gooseberry.
This isn't my affair...
More's the pity...
If I wasn't supplying the body
Then I would never have seen
This side of the Doctor.
I hope that when it's over
We can still be friends.

Imagine, Beverly in love
 With a slug!
 ... No disrespect meant!
 Am I jealous?

Perhaps when Odan has gone -
 If I'm still here...
 That would really annoy
 The Captain... and Deanna...
 Maybe, if I played it right
 I could force Picard
 To make a move...
 Now that would really be
 Doing good!

Jenny Howsam



A BOY DREAMS

Amongst the vines a young boy dreams,
 looks upward into nighttime skies
 oblivious to time, it seems.

To live his life among the stars,
 unwanting of all earthly ties.
 To explore through space and time
 the mysteries of the universe.
 Oh how he longs to leave the Earth,
 of some great ship to take command.

His time will come, but not tonight.
 Soon his boyhood left behind;
 holds many lives within his hand
 strong arms embrace all that is right.

But for the moment he will leave his dreams behind,
 runs towards the lights of home,
 "Where have you been, Jean Luc ?" his mother's voice demands.
 Tonight his fate is in her hands.

Lindsay Wright.



TO PRESS THE TRIGGER

My programming says
 "Do not murder."
 I was made to respect
 And to serve mankind.
 My circuits tell me
 To put down the weapon.

But

You are a thief,
 A kidnapper, a murderer.
 You have no morality
 And no compassion.
 You must be stopped.
 You must cease your games.

I do not feel anger,
 I do not feel revulsion,
 But I see the injustice
 Of letting you continue.

Yet

Can I press the trigger?
 Can I murder?
 Is this murder?

I have seen death often.
 Heroism. Sacrifice.
 I remember them all
 In every detail.

And then

Tasha... Marla Aster...
 Varria... Their deaths
 Served no purpose.

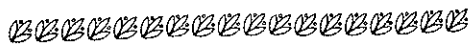
And you.

This is not murder.
 You deserve to die.

Yes

I can press the trigger.

Jenny Howsam



WHERE NO CAT HAS GONE BEFORE

by

Pen Cramphorn

Spot the cat yawned and stretched.

He was bored - and worse, he was feeling put out. He didn't like feeling put out; it upset his digestion and interfered with his nap schedule, which in turn tended to mar his natural good looks. He jumped down off the bed (where he had *not* been sleeping well) and inspected himself in the mirror. Just as he had suspected, his luxurious apricot coloured coat had lost some of its customary sheen. This was all Data's fault! (Data was his particular servant, and as such, responsible for Spot's wellbeing at all times, but he had been most unsatisfactory of late; inattentive almost to the point of rudeness.)

I allow him too much latitude, Spot muttered to himself as he padded out of the door. *Why, a few lifetimes ago my ancestors would have had his head for this kind of behaviour!* However, he had to admit to himself that he couldn't really imagine life without Data around.

I suppose I'll just have to temper justice with mercy, he sighed, and set off along the corridor in search of some excitement.

"Mr Worf, please open a direct channel to Admiral Hanbury." Captain Jean-Luc Picard stood up, tugging down his uniform top as the face of Admiral Hanbury appeared on the main viewscreen.

"Captain Picard," she started, formally. She leaned forward eagerly. "I take it you have arrived at Genos VII?"

"We have, Admiral, and we are about to start the geological and archaeological studies. As you said you wished to be kept informed of our progress - "

"Yes, yes. Yes, thank you, Jean-Luc," she interrupted. She paused for a moment. "Every indication we have had so far points to this planet being the home world of the Virini, so, as you are aware, this mission is of the utmost importance. I'm sure I do not have to tell you how much care needs to be taken?"

"Of course not, Admiral," agreed Picard politely. His smile, Riker noted, was looking slightly jaded.

"Of course not," Hanbury echoed. "Well, Captain, as you won't be expecting any results in the near future, I'll leave it a while before I contact you again."

Picard inclined his head. "Very well, Admiral. Picard out."

As the image faded from the screen, Picard turned to Riker and raised a sardonic eyebrow. "By that, of course, Number One, she means she'll be hailing us every hour or so."

Riker grinned. "Then we'd better start turning up some results. All the same, it is rather fascinating, sir."

"Oh, agreed, Number One," responded the Captain. "I have to confess to being interested in the outcome." The Captain's casual words could not belie the excitement in his voice. His love of archaeology was well-known to his staff. Riker glanced at Deanna Troi and they

exchanged amused smiles behind Picard's back.

The Virini were well documented throughout the known galaxy. Their artefacts had been found on many planets, and indicated a glorious - and technically advanced - civilization; However, the location of their homeworld had remained a mystery until sensor surveys of the planet Genos VII had shown traces of plant spores, indigenous to the planet, which had also been found on some of the artefacts.

"Well, said Riker, "it promises to be an interesting few days."

Ensign John Walsh paused in his task of packing geological equipment. His sharp ears had caught the sound of a conversation in the corridor outside - not in itself an unusual occurrence, but one voice in particular had caught his attention. It was soft and husky and sensuous - and made him shiver. In short, it was the voice of the girl of his dreams, the girl he was hoping to persuade to visit Ten-Forward with him that evening. Work temporarily forgotten, Walsh ducked out into the corridor, just as a small apricot-coloured being slipped in, unnoticed. Spot had seen the box and planned to investigate. He was feeling sleepy, and had decided that it would do Data no harm at all to be without his master for a short while. He leaped into the box and gave a mowl of pain as the equipment grazed his leg. As he bent his head to lick the wound the lid snapped shut and the box was picked up. Spot tried to stand, but his injured leg gave way, and in a wave of pain he passed out.

He came round to the sound of the transporter beam, and a strange prickling sensation all over his body. The next instant the feeling was gone and the lid of

the box opened. He leaped out, badly startling the geologist who was about to unpack the contents.

Spot limped towards a small tunnel he had noticed opening out of a large outcrop of rock. His intention had been to hole up there while he tended his leg and considered his position, but as it turned out, it saved him. As he scuttled inside, he heard one of the the geologists urgently hailing the Enterprise. Then there was a strangled cry, and to his amazement the entire Away Team simply disappeared. He crouched deeper into the tunnel, his mind whirling.

Up on the ship, time was passing in the normal way. Captain Picard had retired to his Ready Room, ostensibly to check some reports; in actual fact he was sipping hot tea and reading up on all the available data about the Virini. Will Riker, in charge of the bridge, was regaling those who were interested with an amusing, somewhat risqué tale he had heard on his last shore leave, and Data was trying not to think about where Spot had got to, or worse, what his cat had got up to last time he went missing. The voice of one of the Away Team cut into his thoughts.

"Emmerson to - " The voice cut off with a cry and at the same moment the Enterprise lurched like a drunken man. Picard stumbled out onto the bridge as the red alert klaxon blared out.

"Sir!" said Worf from his tactical display. "We are under attack from - " Before he could complete his sentence the ship lurched again, and he pitched forward, striking his head. He slid to the ground unconscious.

"Medical emergency on the bridge!" shouted Riker, as he carefully moved

Worf's inert body and took over tactical. Picard staggered to his chair. Damage reports were coming in from all over the ship.

"Status, Mr Data?" he snapped.

Spot padded down the tunnel. He had decided this would be his best course of action. Worry about his people filled his mind, but he also noted the fact that, when viewed closely, the tunnel was obviously not a natural phenomenon. Eventually it began to widen, for which Spot was grateful, for it was a close fit. He wondered about the beings who had made it, when suddenly he found himself at the entrance to a huge room. He looked around in awe. It was similar to the engineering room aboard the Enterprise, but even to Spot's untrained eye the equipment was far more sophisticated.

The room was full of small creatures, not much bigger than Spot himself. They were fascinating to look at. They were roughly bullet-shaped, with no neck; their heads connected directly to their rather chunky bodies. They had three squat legs which did not appear to be jointed; these legs ended in small clawed feet. They had four arms, two long and thin, with hands with three fingers and a thumb - these arms were at the sides of their bodies, roughly half-way down the trunk. Slightly higher, and placed in the centre of their bodies, were shorter, thicker arms ending in claws. The beings had one very large eye in the centre of their heads, with a small lipless mouth underneath. They did not appear to have nostrils, but on the top of their heads there were a series of small holes which probably functioned as nostrils and ears. The creatures were completely covered, apart from their eye, forehead and fingers, in soft downy brown fur.

The beings were absorbed in their machinery, their fingers moving over control panels in a blur. Suddenly there was a loud explosion, and one of the creatures was thrown upwards. It landed on a small ledge high up towards the roof. There was pandemonium among the other creatures as they gathered around, gazing up at their comrade. One of its long thin arms hung downwards, dangling from the ledge, and from this dripped a thick, clear substance which Spot assumed was akin to blood.

He did not hesitate. He darted into the room, jumped to the top of the tallest piece of equipment and from there up next to the injured being. He only just made it, landing with his front paws just on the ledge, the rest of him hanging down. With an ungainly shuffle, and much scrabbling of his hind legs, he managed to pull himself up, feeling profoundly irritated at making such an undignified landing. He turned his attention to the creature.

'Help me, please,' it whispered. Spot looked down at the body and promptly wished he had not done so. There was a large burn spreading across 90% of the trunk; and one of the long arms - the one that was oozing the blood-like substance - was hanging half off the body.

'Do you think you could get yourself up onto my back and hold on?' he asked. The being indicated that he thought so. Spot managed to turn himself on the ledge, making it easier for the creature to pull itself up. He tried not to think of the mess the creature's wounds would make on his beautiful fur.

'Hold on as tightly as you can,' he said as he felt the creature drag itself onto him. He shut his eyes and took a flying leap off the ledge straight down to the floor, where he landed heavily and painfully, his already injured leg buckling

under the strain. The other beings crowded round, and Spot felt the heavy weight being taken from his back.

Several of the creatures carried their injured friend away, and one of the remaining creatures began to examine Spot's leg. It barked out orders to the others, who fetched various strange instruments. The creature waved these over Spot's leg, and instantly the pain vanished.

Spot flexed his muscles. 'Thank you,' he said.

'No,' said the being, 'it is we who must thank you. You have saved the life of our brother Tulg.' He stopped and cleared his throat. 'I am Slu, head of the Brotherhood of the Virini. May I ask your name?'

At that moment he was interrupted by another member of the Brotherhood, who had been mending the equipment. 'Weapons systems still on line, Slu,' he told the head of the Brotherhood. 'We will have defeated the space-borne intruder in -' he paused to calculate - 'approximately 5.2 aliens.'

Spot felt a frisson of alarm. 'Space-borne intruder?' he asked.

Slu nodded and pointed to a viewscreen positioned behind Spot's head. Spot turned and froze in horror. On the screen was the Enterprise - *his* Enterprise - being hit by some sort of bright beam of light. He jumped to his feet.

'Stop!' he shouted. 'That's my ship!'

The Virini started at him in horror.

'Stop it!' he yelled again. 'My people are up there! You'll kill them!' He suddenly remembered the Away Team. 'It must have been you who killed my

people here on the planet!' He stared at Slu in accusation.

One of the Virini had dashed over to the weapons system, his fingers moving over the console. Within seconds the beam had disappeared, and the Enterprise was still.

'My people,' Spot muttered. 'What have you done to my people?'

Slu looked over at his comrade by the equipment. 'Elut?'

Elut looked down at another console which resembled a computer screen. 'Sensors indicate all life forms on the ship are relatively unharmed,' he told Spot and Slu.

'As for your planet-bound people,' Slu told Spot, 'They, too, are unharmed. They are in stasis, but will now be released and sent back up to your ship. We deeply apologise for this incident. We assumed the intruders to be Calarans.'

Spot blinked. 'Calarans?' he asked.

'Please,' Slu told him, 'let us take you to our resting area, where you can partake of nourishment while I explain matters to you.'

He and the rest of the Brotherhood led Spot down another tunnel which opened out onto a room roughly the same size as the weapons room, but much more comfortable. Spot curled up on a soft area resembling a bed.

'May we offer you refreshment?' asked Slu.

Spot's whiskers twitched. This was more like it! 'Do you have any feline supplement number twenty-five?' he asked hopefully.

The Virini looked blank.

'Well, never mind - whatever you've got,' said Spot with resignation. Then - 'Tell me about the Calarans,' he asked Slu.

Slu sat next to him, after sending one of the Virini off for food. 'Once we, like you, explored the heavens. We were taller then, without our burrowing appendages, and our bodies were of a different shape.

'We travelled to far-off planets, where we would stay for a while, gathering information for our rooms of knowledge. Then we became involved in a terrible war with a neighbouring planet, Calara. Our beautiful planet was destroyed, laid waste. We were decimated. Those of us who were left were forced to tunnel underground and live here, in this bleak rock. We could no longer survive on the surface because of the fallout from the Calaran weapons. At first many of us died; but eventually our bodies adapted, as you see.' He indicated his strangely-shaped form. 'We learned to survive down here. To defend ourselves from further attacks from the Calarans, we built this powerful weaponry system which detects Calaran ships and destroys them.' He looked gravely round at the rest of the group. 'It seems our screening system has malfunctioned and does not differentiate between Calaran ships and others.'

The other Virini nodded, and Elut spoke up. 'Master Slu, we must take out systems off-line and run a complete diagnostic.'

Slu nodded, an extremely odd movement as, due to the fact that he had no neck, his whole body moved. Spot watched, fascinated.

By now the refreshment had arrived. Spot tucked in with a will, and was pleasantly surprised. Slu watched him eat

for a moment, then said, 'Please, can you tell us who you are and how you came to our world?'

Spot sat up, his back ramrod straight, his ears pricked up. 'I am the last of the noble line of Amphoral.' He paused for a moment in respect, then continued. 'Aeons ago, Amphoral and his scions were worshipped on my home world. Now I, the last of the noble line of Amphoral - ' again the moment of respect - 'take my people out; out into yonder black stuff.' He gesticulated with his head and they all gazed up at the ceiling. 'Yes, out into the black stuff, to - to - ' Spot faltered for a moment, then, suddenly inspired, he carried on - 'to explore strange new worlds, and seek out new life and new civilisations. Like yourselves.' He stopped and looked triumphantly around.

The Virini were gazing at him, open-mouthed. A small one peered round at Spot from behind Slu.

'Oh, Master Slu,' he whispered, 'could it be that this may be - The Supreme Talpa?'

'Lumi,' breathed Slu. 'Lumi, I believe you are right. I had not considered the possibility - but it is happened exactly as foretold! Brotherhood, we are facing The Supreme Talpa!'

All the Virini then did a most curious thing. They flung themselves face down at Spot's feet.

Slu explained, his voice muffled by the position he had adopted. 'The Supreme Talpa is told of in myth. At night in the resting chambers, the stories of his coming are retold. Oh, Supreme Talpa, forgive us - these tales date from the time of our incarceration beneath the ground. So many centuries have passed since then that we believed them purely

to be myths. We see now that it must be true. The Supreme Talpa has come to us, saved us, and will bring us back to the light of our outer world. Blessed be his glorious name!' Slu squinted up at Spot and muttered, 'But I thought you'd be taller.'

Spot was completely nonplussed. Twitching his whiskers, he gathered his wits. 'The Supreme Talpa. I like that. Yes, I think I am doubtless he.' He beamed at the Virini. 'You can get up now.'

Lumi crawled over to him. 'Supreme One, will you help us? How do we return to the outer world? You are wise and brave. Please tell us how to accomplish this, the greatest of our desires.'

Spot narrowed his eyes. He hadn't got a clue as to how they would accomplish it, but as Supreme Talpa it behooved him to think of something, and fast.

Eventually, he said, 'You must contact my people. They will aid you.' *Let them sort it out, he thought. After all, what have they been doing up there all this time? They haven't made one move to see if I'm all right, and I've just saved their lives. Again.* He sighed. Sometimes it was tough, being omnipotent.

'Your people,' said Slu. 'Are they like you, Oh Mighty One?'

Spot permitted himself a small smile. 'Indeed not. I regret that they are still quite primitive. They cannot yet communicate with me. One day I hope they will have the ability, as you and I have, to adapt the rhythm of their brain waves in order to communicate with all types of being, humanoid or other. At present I direct their thoughts with the power of my mind, but they believe that they travel through the black stuff of their own volition. I allow them to believe this, as it gives them a measure of

independence.' His smile broadened as he shook his head. 'As I told you, we travel on to meet new life forms; but imagine! On their own home worlds there are hundreds of life forms that they are still too primitive to communicate with - life forms indigenous to their worlds, who in many cases were there before them, and who could give them many of the answers that they seek!' His smile disappeared. 'At one time they even hunted some of these life forms for food - or even simply for pleasure!'

There were gasps of horror and surprise from the Virini.

'They have passed that stage now, and I hold out high hopes for them,' finished Spot.

Slu stepped forward and bowed low. 'Oh, Supreme Talpa, will you leave these primitives to themselves and stay with us? Guide our footsteps and protect us?'

Spot looked at Slu for a moment. He thought how glorious his life would be here as Supreme Talpa, helping the Virini to reclaim their former position in the galaxy. Such a challenge! Then he thought of the continuing challenge of his life aboard his ship, his beloved Enterprise; he thought of all his people - Jean-Luc, with his strange, smooth head, kind eyes and propensity for quoting Shakespeare; Deanna of the gentle voice and hands; Worf - well, no, probably best not to dwell on Worf. Spot quickly passed on - to Data. Spot felt a rush of pure affection. No. He could not leave Data. He could not leave any of his people. *And besides, he thought, there's no feline supplement twenty-five down here.* He quickly dismissed the thought as unworthy. 'Slu, I am sorry. My people are my responsibility. They need me so much. But I can leave you a token to remind you of my ever-present vigilance, wherever in the black stuff I may be.'

With his hind paw he gave his whiskers a vigorous scratching, eventually dislodging one which fell at Slu's feet. A hush fell over the Virini as Slu picked it up.

'Thank you, oh great and mighty Supreme Talpa,' he whispered.

Gratefully, Picard drew gulps of air down into his lungs. He slowly opened his eyes. He was half sitting, half lying over his chair; all around him the bridge crew, with the exception of Data, were in similarly debilitated condition.

"What happened?" gasped Troi.

Data answered her. "Our life support systems were knocked out by the alien weaponry. I was not affected, and have been able to restore them. I also believe I have successfully located the source of the hostility. It is coming from deep inside the planet."

Inside the planet? Picard took another deep breath and pulled himself to his feet, giving his uniform top its customary brisk tug. "Mr Data - are you reading life forms on the planet?" he asked.

Data shook his head, slowly. "Negative, Captain. However, there is an incredibly powerful energy source here." He jabbed a finger at his computer screen. Picard had moved forward and was looking over his shoulder. "I believe the inhabitants of this planet have the power to shield their presence from our sensors," the android told him.

Riker had come up to stand beside Picard. He, too, was scrutinising Data's screen. "I wonder why they've stopped firing at us," he remarked.

Picard looked at him. "Yes, my

thoughts also, Number One. I hope they haven't got something worse to throw at us. Mr Destris," he said, addressing the crewmember who had taken Worf's place at tactical, "open hailing frequencies and try to contact whoever - or whatever - is down there."

Suddenly Counselor Troi stood. "Captain, I sense..." She paused for a moment to gather her thoughts. "A tremendous feeling of regret - no - " she made an impatient gesture - "repentance. As though we were not the target..." She broke off and shrugged. "I know it sounds ridiculous when we can't scan any life forms. but I sense sentient beings down there."

Spot watched as Slu carefully handed his whisker to the smallest member of the Brotherhood, Lumi. Lumi hurried away with the sacred token, bearing it off to some Virini inner sanctum. Slu turned to Spot.

'Is there anything you wish for, Supreme Talpa?'

"There are two things I will ask of you, Slu," Spot told him. 'One, I need your help to return to my ship. Secondly, before I leave - have you such a thing as a mirror? I am well known among my people for my style and elegance...' His 'voice' trailed off as he observed the blank looks on the faces of the Virini. 'You know, a mirror - a looking glass,' he said hopefully.

'Mirror? Looking glass?' repeated Slu. 'What is this mirror, looking glass?'

Spot looked from one Virini to another and sighed. There were, to be sure, many good things about the Virini - however, good looks was not one of them.

'Forget the mirror,' Spot told them. 'Please return me to my ship - oh, and don't forget to contact my people. Speak to Jean-Luc - he's the one I allow to think he's in charge. And Slu - good luck, and my blessing to you all.'

Spot landed with a jolt on a chair in Ten Forward. *The Virini method of transportation is most odd*, he reflected. It reminded him of something buried deep in his mind - a folk memory; a feeling of flying through the air on some sort of long, wooden stick. The word 'broom' was just beginning to form itself in his brain when he realised where he had materialised and he promptly forgot his method of arrival.

'Ten-Forward! Good choice, Slu!' he said appreciatively. 'There's usually some tasty morsels to be had around here!' He jumped down from his chair and wandered around. The place was unusually quiet. In fact, it seemed to be deserted. Spot gave a disgusted growl and made for the door. It was about time he had a word with Data.

On the bridge, Picard was waiting anxiously for some reaction to the message he had sent down to the planet. He was still feeling bewildered - although relieved - by the news that the Away Team had suddenly materialised in Sickbay, when, without any warning, the main viewscreen lit up. Every pair of eyes on the bridge turned towards the image; every pair of eyes was riveted by the appearance of a strange little furry one-eyed alien.

'I am Slu, of the Brotherhood of the Virini,' said Slu. Picard and Riker exchanged stunned glances. 'Greetings, people of The Supreme Talpa, blessed be

his name,' Slu continued. The 'people of The Supreme Talpa' watched in amazement as Slu's head lowered, and his two long arms came out straight in front of him, the backs of his hands turned inwards and touching each other. He then described two upside-down V shapes with his hands. As his head came up, Slu's eye flashed with anger. He raised his arms to the same position and, glaring at Picard, he repeated, much louder, '*Blessed be his name!*'

"Oh, ah, yes - er - blessed be his name," repeated Picard, making the same gesture as Slu and nodding frantically at Riker and Troi to follow suit. Slu nodded, pleased. The bridge crew found this movement as fascinating as Spot had done.

Slu looked at Picard. 'You are the Jean-Luc?'

Picard cleared his throat. "Ah - yes... That is, I am Captain Jean-Luc Picard of the USS Enterprise -"

'Yes, yes,' Slu cut him off, testily. 'The Supreme Talpa has told us all about you; no doubt he has told you about us.'

Picard looked blank. "I'm afraid we have had no contact with - er, the, er, Supreme Talpa," he said apologetically.

'Hmmm,' said Slu, somewhat surprised until he recalled what The Supreme Talpa had said - his people could not communicate with him. He repeated the story he had told Spot, of the war with the Calarans, and how it had put paid to the Virini habit of exploration and knowledge gathering, forcing them instead to live underground. 'So, at the suggestion of The Supreme Talpa, we appeal to you for aid. We wish to return to our former lives. We have a great deal to offer in return,' Slu concluded.

"I do not doubt it," Picard said sincerely, thinking not only of their incredibly strong energy source but of the knowledge these people must have amassed in their travels around the galaxy.

He assured Slu that the Federation would do everything in their power to aid the Virini. Slu's face relaxed into a gracious smile.

"That is very pleasing. I understand now why The Supreme Talpa has such very high hopes for your people.' Once again he raised his hands in the peculiar gesture. Picard, Riker and Troi hurriedly did likewise.

'The Supreme Talpa,' intoned Slu. 'Blessed be his name.'

"Blessed be his name," echoed Picard, glaring at Riker, who seemed to be having some difficulty in keeping a straight face. Slu's image faded from the screen.

Picard slumped down in his chair and puffed out his cheeks. Next to him, Riker said, "The Virini. They still exist. This is incredible. Think of the benefit to the Federation! All that knowledge!"

"Indeed." Data swivelled in his chair. "The reports of Virini civilisation go back many thousand years. Their artifacts have been found on planets as varied as -"

"Thank you, Mr Data, perhaps you could fill us in at a later time," Picard told him quickly, as Riker again struggled to suppress a smile. The Captain turned towards Deanna Troi, who was obviously deep in thought.

"Are you all right, Counselor?"

Troi came out of her reverie with a slight jolt. "Perfectly, Captain - I was just

reflecting on what a strange mix the Virini seem to be."

"In what way?" Picard asked.

"Well, I sensed a powerful intelligence, Captain; sagacity compassion, a feeling of great awareness of age, and even suffering. A very logical, practical people. But Captain - " she looked up into Picard's eyes - "their deity - that Supreme Talpa - I sensed some form of... cat!"

As Picard stared at her, Data started to his feet. The memory of a missing Spot had leaped into his mind at Troi's mention of the word 'cat'. A missing Spot, wreaking havoc around the ship, like last time. He turned to Picard.

"Sir, could I have your permission to leave the bridge for a short time? I have something of a personal nature to attend to."

Picard felt that he had gone beyond surprise. If Data had announced his intention to strip naked and declaim the soliloquy from Hamlet he felt he would have been incapable of any reaction. He nodded weakly.

Data hurried down the corridor to his quarters. He had decided to place bowls of feline supplement twenty-five at strategic points around the Enterprise and have them observed continuously. He could not afford another incident like last time. He could not recall ever having seen the Captain quite so annoyed with a member of staff before - and Data had been that member of staff. The android had often pondered over what aspect of Spot's behaviour had upset the Captain the most. Was it the small fire in Engineering? The disruption in Sickbay? Or the unpleasant surprise in his shoes? You could never tell with Humans.

As the door to his quarters whooshed open, Data stopped in his tracks. There, curled up on the bed, fast asleep, lay Spot. Data stared at him. "Spot?"

The Supreme Talpa raised his weary head and gave Data a haughty stare. Data immediately noticed the missing whisker. What *had* Spot been up to now?

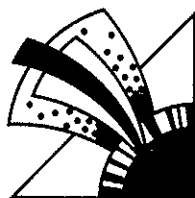
'It's about time, Mr Data,' Spot told him. 'A bowl of feline supplement twenty-five, if you please, and look sharp about it.' He watched as Data ordered up a bowl of his favourite food.

The android stayed just long enough

to watch Spot cross from the bed to the bowl and start eating, then he left, making sure to lock the door behind him.

Spot finished his meal and climbed back onto his bed. He thought about the Virini, and hoped they would be able to manage their affairs without him. As his head nodded and his eyes began to close, he felt glad he had decided to return to his beloved Enterprise. It would have been gratifying to be worshipped, but no doubt it could become cloying.

And, after all - whatever *would* Data do without him?



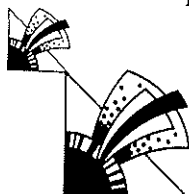
A MAN

Beneath a uniform of red and black
Lie muscles strong and sinews honed,
A heart that beats, but not his own -
Lost in a brawl when he was young.
Now youth has gone, a wisdom tempered,
Responsible for many lives
Past,

Present,

And remembered.

Lindsay Wright.



LET US PREY

by

Christine Carr

CHAPTER ONE

Kitia's stomach growled empty again, reminding her that it was over twenty-four hours since she had last eaten. She willed herself to ignore the hunger pangs, and concentrated instead on observing the street scene in front of her as she peered furtively around the corner of the pile of pallets behind which she was hidden. The young girl was dressed in clothing little better than rags, and she looked dirty and unkempt. The chill drizzle of the Exa autumn had soaked her, plastering her long blonde hair to her scalp and sticking her clothes to her body. She shivered miserably.

The market was crowded in spite of the weather, with jostling hordes pushing and shoving between the cluster of stalls. Kitia kept her attention tightly focused on her targets.

Michra, the fat baker, was deep in conversation with an old lady who held a pet fimgra tightly on its leash. Lomix, the greengrocer, was arguing with two plump servants from one of the local households. Kitia knew that she couldn't hope for a more opportune moment than this.

The girl darted from her hiding place and dashed through the milling crowd. She nimbly jumped over the fimgra's leash, reaching deep into Michra's bread stack as she did so, then, jerking her body round at a crazy angle, she grabbed for some kingka fruits. She took advantage of the moment's head start she had over the storekeepers to try to get out of the square.

Cries behind her warned her that she might be unlucky. "Stop her! Stop thief!" She glanced around, found her planned exit route suddenly blocked by a delivery cart, and panicked, wondering which way to run, knowing all the

time that every moment of indecision placed her in ever greater danger. She dreaded even the thought of another beating.

"Psst! Cellatha! This way!" It was an old voice, and insistent.

"What - ?" Kitia muttered under her breath, astonished. Cellatha was a word from home, and it had been many weeks since she had heard her native tongue. She followed the voice.

The old woman pointed insistently at a cellar grating and said, "In there! Now!"

Kitia did not need to be told twice; she could hear the cries of her pursuers coming ever closer. She threw her spoils through the grating, and wriggled in after them. Safe inside, she crouched down, kept as still as she could, and listened to the sounds coming from above. The two merchants chattered in angry consternation, wondering where their quarry had gone. They asked the old lady several questions, but her slow, vague, unhelpful answers caused them to abandon any hope of getting information from her. They reluctantly gave up the chase and headed back to their stalls.

Several minutes went by. Kitia's heart slowed, and her eyes gradually grew accustomed to the darkness. She gathered up the bread and fruits from where they had landed and clutched them to her breast. She wondered where she could get her next meal from: certainly she did not dare to come back to the market again in a hurry. She sat down against a wall, huddled herself into a tight defensive ball, and shivered.

A while later footsteps echoed down from the floor above and the cellar door creaked open. The old woman poked her head round the corner, then made her slow and painful way down the cellar steps. "You're safe now, Cellatha," she

said, speaking slightly hesitantly in Anchai.

Kitia stared at her, eyes wide. Then, softly, she inquired, "Who... Who are you?"

"Mitcheka Korl." The child did not respond, and the old woman knew she needed reassurance. "I'm a friend."

"You speak Anchai!" The child voiced the revelation that had been burning its miraculous way through her mind.

"Many people speak Anchai hereabouts."

"But - " Disbelief echoed in Kitia's voice.

"Did you really believe that you were the only native Anchaiki in this godforsaken place?" The old lady sighed softly, sadly. "No. There are many such as yourself here, hiding from the world, living as best they can."

"I did not know that." Kitia shook her head, astonished. "Are you Anchaiki?"

The old woman sighed and said, "Perhaps, once, I might have been. But I made my choice, and I'm Exa now." Kitia did not understand how being Anchaiki could be a matter of choice; surely either you were or you were not. However, she felt too overwhelmed to pursue that issue further. In any case, the old woman was speaking again, asking, "And what is your name, child?"

"Kitia."

Mitcheka nodded. "A pretty name. And do you have a den, Kitia?"

"No. Some boys chased me out of mine last night." She sighed. They had been Exa boys - laughing, terrifying louts - and she had been no match for them. It was not even as though they had needed her place or her food. Evicting her had just been a game to them.

It happened all too often, and Kitia had grown to expect such things.

"You may stay here for a while if you wish." The old lady began to rummage through some cupboards. "I've plenty of blankets. Even some warm clothes, if you want them."

"I..."

"It's all right. This is my house. You're safe down here. At least, as safe as you ever can be in Central City."

"Thank you." The words were whispered, but sincerely spoken, as Kitia responded gratefully to the first act of kindness she had encountered since her arrival in this place.

Later that evening, as Kitia lay huddled and warm beneath the blankets, she thought about life in the city. She had come to believe that this was the only life now, and her home and family were forever lost to her. She could not understand, no matter how hard she tried, how she had come to be here, or even where here was. She wondered for the thousandth time how it was that every time she found a perfect den, hidden, dry and warm, someone would find her and chase her away from it. She wondered, in spite of the old woman's assurances, if anywhere in the city could ever be truly safe.

Then Kitia thought back over the conversation they had had, and wondered about all the other Anchaiki of whom Mitcheka Korl had spoken. She comforted herself by imagining how it would be to find companionship in this place. She resolved to start looking for the other Anchaiki tomorrow.

She fell asleep, a smile curving her lips for the first time in a long while.

Geordi La Forge found his android friend sitting quietly in a corner of Ten Forward, yellow eyes focused on a group of the Enterprise's resident teenagers who were having an impromptu birthday

celebration for one of their number. The Human drew up a chair and sat down next to Data. He grinned, and gesturing towards the happy group said, "They seem to be having a good time."

"Yes," agreed the android. "It is my observation that that is normal when Humans celebrate birthdays. It makes them feel special."

"Yeah. Mostly that's true."

"There are exceptions?" asked Data, ever curious to learn more about the Humans amongst whom he lived and worked.

"There are always exceptions." Geordi sighed, knowing from past experience how this conversation would proceed. Data would not be satisfied until all such exceptions had been fully detailed. "Sometimes, if a Human feels like he's getting old, or if he's lonely, then birthdays make him feel worse."

Data's head tilted to one side, a gesture that Geordi recognised as meaning that his explanation didn't make much sense to the android. That was, perhaps, not surprising. Data didn't grow old in the human sense, and he probably couldn't feel lonely. *Though*, reflected Geordi, *you never quite know with Data*. On the one hand the android claimed that he was incapable of experiencing emotions, while on the other he kept a holo of Tasha Yar in his quarters and held cherished memories of her. Oddly enough, Data seemed oblivious of this paradox.

Geordi tried again. "Look, birthdays tend to be shared with friends, right?"

"Yes," Data agreed.

"So if your friends are some place else on your birthday, then you'll miss them all the more because they should all be

there with you on your special day."

"Yes," said Data again, though he seemed a little doubtful. "What about feeling old?"

Geordi sighed, beginning to wish that he had never started this. "Humans," he tried to explain, "sometimes feel that time is passing by, and it makes us feel... bad. It's usually because we haven't done something that we'd like to have done, we feel that time is running out, and birthdays make us feel worse because of the way we count age, marking the transition from one year to the next. Does that make sense?"

"I am trying to understand," the android answered. "But Geordi, it seems to me that there is no sense in Humans feeling worse like that. Time runs constantly, and the marking of age in such a manner does not alter the fact that Humans age at a constant rate."

Geordi shrugged and said, "Yeah, well," in a noncommittal way that really didn't help. "Perhaps you need to see it from a Human perspective to understand. It does seem silly, the way you put it."

Data nodded slightly, almost sadly. "But I cannot see it from a Human perspective, Geordi. I am not Human, and I have no birthday to celebrate."

Geordi was about to open his mouth when his communicator twittered. *Saved by the bell!* Geordi thought, grateful for the interruption. He tapped his insignia, saying, "La Forge here," as he did so.

"Commander, this is Ensign Gomez. I'm sorry to disturb you, but I'm tracking an irregularity in the intermix feed. Could you come down and take a look?"

"Okay, Ensign. I'm on my way." Geordi stood, giving Data an apologetic

look as he did so. "I'll catch you later, Data, huh? It's probably nothing, but..."

"Yes. I will 'catch you later', too."

The Engineer headed out of Ten Forward, and glanced at Data just as he reached the door. Data's head was turned in the opposite direction, and Geordi could see that the android's attention had turned once more in the direction of the teenagers. Geordi sighed, knowing Data well enough to fear that the android was about to enter another period of excessive introspection.

Kitia awoke with a start. She jolted upright, alarmed, wondering what had disturbed her. Suddenly she felt the earth quiver beneath her, and the air seemed to tremble. The sensation reminded Kitia of standing on the major routeways during rush-hour, but she could not understand why this should be happening here and now. She froze, wondering what to do.

The rumbling and shaking grew worse and worse, and Kitia could not have moved now even if she had wanted to. She could hear shrieks and screams coming in from outside.

And then she heard the first thuds of falling masonry, and the shattering of glass as it fell into the road.

So much, the child thought with a bitterness older than her years, for being safe in Central City. So much for making plans for tomorrow.

The buildings fell around her, and the earth roiled.

CHAPTER TWO

"Sir," Lt Worf rumbled from the tactical station, "I am picking up a distress

signal."

Captain Jean-Luc Picard said, "On screen, Lieutenant," as he rose from his chair.

"It's audio only," the Klingon responded, as the bridge filled with the static-ridden transmission.

"... requesting aid. Earthquake damage is extensive with much of the Central City destroyed. Tsunami have struck the secondary land-masses and our planetary resources cannot cope with relief efforts of this scale. Message repeats. This is the Mayor's Office, Exa III, requesting Federation aid. Earthquake damage is..."

Worf cut off the message at a gesture from the Captain.

"Ensign," the Captain said, addressing himself to the young woman at the con, "lay in a course for Exa III. Data, what do you have on that planet?"

Data seemed to look inwards for a moment as he retrieved the information and gathered it into a coherent form. "Exa III," he said, "is a nonaligned world. It is a Class M planet with, at the last census, a humanoid population of approximately one point three seven billion. Planetary government is by a democratically elected council, headed by the Mayor. Current levels of development are approximately equivalent to those of late twenty-first century Earth." Data paused for a moment, then added, "I have no information regarding geological or tectonic instability on Exa III." The android seemed faintly surprised at this lack. If Exa III was prone to severe tectonic disturbances, such information ought to be readily accessible. That it was not indicated how unusual such upheavals were.

"Worf," the Captain said, "try to

contact this Mayor. Tell the Exans that we're on our way. Estimated time of arrival is...?" He looked at Data for assistance with the maths.

"Thirty-two hours at warp eight, sir," the android supplied helpfully.

Picard nodded his thanks to Data, but continued to speak to Worf. "Thirty-two hours. If you can get any information about their most urgent requirements, that would be helpful."

"Aye, sir," the big Klingon acknowledged, and set about his assigned task.

"Data," Captain Picard said, "let all department heads know of our current change of status. I want a meeting of all senior officers in one hour to organise Away Teams and so forth. Meanwhile, I'll be in my ready room if you need me. You have the con."

"Aye, sir."

Kitia woke up screaming. She was pinned down and trapped in utter darkness. She whimpered, terrified. Tears trickled from underneath her eyelids. Her right leg and her chest throbbed painfully, and dust blocked her nose. She could feel the cloying warmth of blood - her blood - as it trickled down the side of her face. She passed out again.

"LORIS!" Mayor Constatyn's bellow echoed around the quake damaged government centre causing a few sharp intakes of breath and a couple of people to mutter, "Uh oh. He's gonna cop it now," under their breath.

"A word. In my office. NOW!"

Nervously, the object of the Mayor's wrath

trotted obediently after his employer who was seething visibly. Loris suspected he knew what was wrong.

Once the two men were safely inside the Mayor's room, Constatyn shut the door behind them and said, "Do you realise what you've done?"

"Sir?" Loris hedged, reflecting that it would be unwise to make any admissions until he knew the extent of Constatyn's knowledge about his activities. Perhaps, if he were really lucky, Constatyn would be agitated about some missing file or other.

"It was you who sent the distress call, wasn't it?"

No such luck, then, Loris thought. There's no point trying to hide anything now. "Sir, I did. As per protocol 13, paragraph 6, section A of the Civil Defence Code."

"Don't you realise the position you've put us in?"

Loris wiped sweaty palms against his thighs and decided to hide behind rules and regulations for a little while longer. He took a deep breath and said, "As the Code allows, I requested Federation aid. The quake damage to this city and the flood damage to the Shinga Provinces are too extensive for us to deal with alone. There are lives at stake, lives that can be saved when Starfleet comes to assist us. The Enterprise has already signalled that it's on its way."

"And what happens afterwards? What happens if they discover the Anchai Game? The Federation will cut off all trade links with us for sure. You might save lives now, but you could have wrecked the economy for decades to come!"

Loris looked straight into the Mayor's eyes and said, "It was a difficult decision to make. But I hope that I made the right one. Now, if you'll excuse me..." The secretary rose and left without waiting for permission from the Mayor

as protocol demanded. Once safely out in the corridor, Loris leant against the wall, and shuddered with a combination of shock and relief. The secretary was scared of the Mayor, and he had never knowingly crossed or opposed him before. Loris was certain that Constatyn would exact his revenge somehow, some day. For now, though, Loris had things to attend to.

Constatyn perched himself on the corner of his desk and considered what he should do. The trouble was, of course, that Loris couldn't be condemned for doing his job properly.

Constatyn might wish it were otherwise, but Loris, true to his usual efficient form, had somehow made his way through the damaged city to arrive at the office before anyone else and he had used his initiative to get relief efforts under way. He'd used his initiative to good effect, except for that distress call.

Damage limitation, Constatyn thought. That's the thing now. He desperately needed to 'wrong foot' any Starfleet teams that might come. He wondered how best he could do this, realising as he did so that a key factor in a successful relief effort was access to information. Therefore, the first thing to do was to cut off the flow of that information, and the best way to do that was to cut off the communication system.

Mayor Constatyn made his way to the government's communication centre, and switched off the subspace receiver, trusting that no-one would notice the act for hours, if at all. Planetary communications operated through different consoles.

Time. That gives me time to figure out what I'll say to them before they arrive. Constatyn made his way silently back to his office, deep in thought.

Picard outlined the reasons for the Enterprise's course change then looked

around at his senior officers. They looked back, their expressions thoughtful and sombre.

"Commander Data will draw up a roster of rescue parties and will post it before arrival. Any special requests or needs should be addressed to him in the first instance. Comments, anyone?"

"Sir," rumbled Worf, "I am still unable to raise Exa III on the subspace channels."

"That is certainly an inconvenience," Picard mused. "You'll just have to keep trying, Lieutenant. Meanwhile, we'll just have to make plans based on the information that we do have. Do you have any idea why the Exans have not responded?"

"Impossible to say at this distance, sir." The Klingon's deep voice seemed to echo his dissatisfaction at being unable to answer the question. "Either they cannot, or they will not, respond."

"And given that they sent the message earlier, and are therefore prepared to communicate with us, it suggests that they are unable to respond." Riker stroked his beard thoughtfully, adding, "Let's hope that it's not because of another earthquake."

"Quite so, Number One. Anything else? No? You are dismissed."

The officers rose as one and headed for the conference room door.

The Enterprise was barely one hour away from Exa III when Worf suddenly announced that he had succeeded in making contact with the Mayor's office at last.

"On screen, Lieutenant," Picard

ordered. He stood up and gently tugged at his uniform shirt as he took a couple of paces towards the viewscreen. The Captain found himself facing the image of a big man. The Exan's body appeared to be well fleshed, but more with muscle than fat. He had shrewd blue eyes which were surrounded by a deceptively benign looking face.

Constatyn accepted the Federation's offer of help on Exa's behalf, and expressed gratitude when he heard that other Federation ships could be summoned should extra help prove necessary.

Constatyn's image continued saying, "We have been focusing our own relief efforts on the centre of Central City. Much of the planet's political and financial infrastructure is located here, as well as a substantial number of homes. If we want things to get back to normal, this is where relief efforts must be concentrated."

"What about other areas of the city? And the tsunami damage?"

"There has been substantial damage to the rundown residential areas closest to the river estuary," Constatyn answered. "We're not unduly worried about that, as the residential population of the area is rather small. The area was evacuated several years ago as the buildings are slated for demolition, just a few squatters live there. That's all. In a way the quake has done us a favour. We wish to construct our new space port there."

"Very nice," observed Picard, his tone dry.

"The tsunami damage," Constatyn said, getting back to the point, "has been severe, but fortunately there appear to be few casualties. Most people got away from the affected areas in plenty of time.

Our concern now is to prevent the spread of disease in the areas as people return to them. The water supplies are all contaminated."

"My Chief Medical Officer suggested that you might have difficulties with contamination. She wishes to speak to your medical personnel about that. Before we arrive, if possible."

"Good."

Picard continued to look straight at Constatyn's image and said, "When we do arrive, we intend to start our relief efforts immediately. If we then consult should you consider our deployment to be inappropriate?"

"That would seem to be acceptable, Captain Picard. But please take note that we do need much help in the central districts of the city."

"Very well, Mayor. I will ensure that you receive help there upon our arrival."

"Thank you, Captain."

As soon as the connection was severed, Picard looked at the ship's Counselor.

Deanna Troi looked slightly uncomfortable, and she seemed to weigh her words carefully before she spoke. Her black eyes turned towards the Captain as she said, "He does not seem pleased to see us."

"Oh?" The single syllable was blandly spoken, inviting Deanna to continue.

"It is hard to be certain, just from seeing the Mayor on the viewscreen, but I suspect that he regrets the action that has brought us here. He is hiding something."

Picard turned to face the tactical

station. "Worf," he said. "The distress call we picked up. Did it come from Mayor Constatyn?"

The Klingon tapped a few pads on his console, then he looked down at the Captain and said, "No name is attached to the message, sir. It merely identifies its point of origin as the Mayor's Office. However, it is definitely not in the Mayor's voice."

"Thank you, Lieutenant." Probably the anonymity of the message indicated nothing one way or the other. Constatyn could easily have ordered that the message be sent, whether he actually recorded it or not. Still, it gave food for thought. Picard turned to the Counselor again. "Recommendations?" he invited softly.

"I suggest that we treat the Mayor's information and desires with a certain amount of caution."

"Agreed."

CHAPTER THREE

Lt Commander Data pulled Kitia out of the rubble at 23:28 local time. Her body was bloody and bruised, but miraculously she had survived having a building drop on her two days before. Her eyelids flickered open, but she did not cry out. She was too weak to do anything.

Data tried inexpertly to offer the child some words of comfort as Dr Alis waved a medical tricorder over her and confirmed that it was safe to move her. The paramedics then carried her off to Dr Crusher's 'field hospital' which had been set up in one of the shuttle-bays aboard the Enterprise.

"Commander Data!" Lt (junior grade)

Collins called from nearby. "I've got another person here!"

"Coming," said the android. He made his way rapidly over to the Lieutenant, and started shifting bricks.

"Ah. Captain." Mayor Constatyn's image popped up on the terminal in Picard's ready room. The Captain sighed slightly before turning to face the visual pick up. He adopted his blandest, most noncommittal expression and said smoothly, "Mayor Constatyn, how may I help you?"

"Captain, it has come to my attention that several of your rescue teams are operating in the River Bank districts."

"That's correct, yes."

"I had requested that priority should be given to the Central District."

"There are also several rescue teams in the Central District, Mr Mayor, as per your request."

"Yes, Captain. But perhaps a few more...?" The Mayor's voice was annoyingly polite.

"Mayor Constatyn," Picard said, "there are currently fifty rescue teams on Exa III. Of these, twenty-five are located in Shinga Province and twenty-five are in Central City. Of those in the City, eight teams are in the Central districts. Any more, and they'd be tripping over each other!" Picard thought about the sensor sweeps Data had conducted as the Enterprise approached Exa and established orbit. Based on his findings, the android had advocated fewer teams should be placed in the Central District. However, Picard, against his better judgement and mindful of Constatyn's

request, had overridden Data's recommendations.

Mayor Constatyn looked sideways for a moment as though someone was trying to attract his attention. Picard suspected, however, that it was merely a ruse to allow the Mayor to gather his thoughts without losing face. Constatyn turned back to the screen, and said, "Captain, I must assure you, I have good grounds for asking you to redeploy your men. Our infrastructure - "

"Is less important than saving lives, surely," Picard observed, interrupting the Mayor's sentence. "According to our sensors some eight hundred people are trapped in your 'evacuated' districts. Or perhaps you were not aware of that?" Picard's words offered Constatyn an excuse, and as he'd expected, the Mayor took advantage of it.

"Of course, Captain, your equipment is far superior to ours..."

Yes, thought Picard, it is. But it's not that much superior. What is it about those people that you want to keep from us, Mr Mayor? There was no point asking Constatyn to his face, though. Picard could see that.

Constatyn made his good-byes to Picard, and disconnected. For several moments Picard sat at his desk, tapping it absent-mindedly, then he decided a visit to sick-bay would be in order.

Dr Beverly Crusher stared down at a list of priority patients and sighed. It was growing at an alarming rate, and people were arriving faster than the medical staff could treat them.

"Beverly." Jean-Luc Picard's voice dragged Dr Crusher's mind away from her task.

Her impatience was clear on her face as she greeted the Captain.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, and I'll only be a moment," Picard promised.

"You can only have a moment," Beverly said, thrusting her PADD and her hands deep into her lab coat pockets.

"I want to know," Picard said, "if there is anything different about the Exans coming up from the River Bank sections. Anything that might explain why Mayor Constatyn wants our people kept away from there."

"Depends what you mean by 'different'," the Doctor replied. "They are mostly undernourished and have parasites, if that's what you had in mind. There are quite a lot of children, too. Why? What are you looking for?"

"I don't know, Doctor," the Captain admitted. "It's just a hunch, but... Look, if you do find anything, let me know. All right?"

"All right."

Picard withdrew, knowing that Crusher wouldn't thank him for keeping her from her work any longer.

Deanna Troi felt battered by all the alien emotions bombarding her senses, but she didn't mind. She felt needed, and the fulfilment of doing a worthwhile job more than compensated for any inconvenience she experienced. She lost count of the number of Exans she comforted as they returned to consciousness in the wholly unfamiliar surroundings.

The Counselor was not the only person helping the overstretched medical

staff. A number of the ship's civilians had jumped at the chance to make themselves useful. Deanna trusted them to call her if the need arose and she appreciated the help that they were providing as she knew all too well that she couldn't be everywhere at once.

Just now Deanna was sitting with an elderly man. Although his wounds were not especially serious, he had been brought aboard the Enterprise several hours before out of consideration for his age.

He blinked incurious pale blue eyes at the Counselor, and tilted his head slightly to get a better look at the ward. He turned back to look at Deanna Troi, who answered the unspoken question. "You are on the Federation Starship Enterprise. I am Counselor Deanna Troi."

Tired, the old man closed his eyes. He looked as though he had fallen asleep again, though Deanna could sense he was still awake. That was confirmed a few moments later, when his eyes opened again, slightly more focused this time. He spoke. "You came to help us?"

"We answered the distress call, yes."

"How... How bad was the damage?"

"Severe. I am sorry." Deanna patted his hand in a sympathetic manner.

"Save your comfort for those who need it, young lady." A slight curve to his lips took the sting out of his abrupt words. "When you get to my age, things don't matter so much."

Tentatively, Deanna reached out, and sensed that the old man really was as unconcerned as he acted. She smiled down at him, knowing that it would be safe to leave him alone. She stood to leave, and said, "If you need anything,

just ask any of the volunteers."

"Thank you," he said, eyes drifting shut again. This time, Deanna sensed sleep would follow.

"Deanna," a voice said from behind her.

"Oh, Will! You startled me!"

That admission took Riker by surprise; it was very hard to take a Betazoid unawares.

It was evidence, if any were needed, of how wrapped up in her current task Deanna Troi had become. "You need a break," William Riker observed.

Deanna Troi was about to deny this, but then she took a good look at the First Officer and saw the fatigue she felt mirrored in the way he walked and in the lines etched around his eyes. "So do you," she said, realising that this must be why he was on board the Enterprise at the moment. "I can't take long."

"Me neither. Can you spare thirty minutes?"

Deanna nodded in reply.

"Ten Forward?" Riker suggested. "Chocolate sundaes?"

Deanna's lips curved upwards. "You certainly know how to tempt a woman, Will Riker!"

The two friends made their way through the mass of patients, Deanna pausing only long enough to tell Keiko Ishikawa where she was going.

Out in the corridor Deanna sighed deeply and Will Riker could see the

tension visibly lessen in the Counselor's body. He looked at her protectively and said, "You've been in there too long!"

She shook her head. "No, Will. I'm fine. Really." She put her arm through his reassuringly. "I believe you said something about chocolate?"

And she gasped.

Riker grabbed her, preventing her from falling, as a look of terrible distress appeared on her face. "Deanna! What is it? What's wrong?"

"Terrible fear! Someone in there is terribly afraid! I must help them, Will!"

Riker looked indecisive, caught between his wish to protect Deanna by taking her as far away as possible from all the emotional turmoil and her desire to go back into it.

Keiko stuck her head out into the corridor at that moment and made the decision for him. "Counselor! Come quickly! It's one of the children, and he seems hysterical!"

Riker and Troi followed the Japanese woman back into the makeshift ward. "Get a doctor!" Deanna commanded, looking at the child. Then, more softly, pushing aside the fear she was receiving from the boy, Deanna said as gently as she was able, "You are safe. You're on the Starship Enterprise."

Deanna's words had no effect on the patient. The Counselor took the child's shoulders gently in her hands. "You're safe now. Do you understand?"

Then the Counselor realised with a sudden flash of intuition, that was the problem.

The child *didn't* understand a word she

said! Yet that was impossible: the universal translator had a complete set of matrices for all of Exa's languages.

"Will," Deanna said, "he doesn't understand!"

"But that's not possible."

There was no time to discuss the matter further as Doctor Selar chose that moment to arrive. The Vulcan held a hypospray against the child's throat and gave him a sedative.

The child sank back down against the bed clothes, unconscious. Troi seemed to sink back too, relieved as the pressure of the boy's emotions against her mind lessened. "How long will he remain unconscious?" the Counselor asked.

"About three hours," Selar replied.

"And what will happen when he does wake up again?" Riker asked.

Betazoid and Vulcan exchanged glances, then Troi said, "Nothing will have changed. He will still be terrified. And we can't keep him unconscious indefinitely."

"Ah! Come in, Number One, Counselor." Jean-Luc Picard noted the fatigue exhibited by his two visitors, but he kept his thoughts to himself. He rose from behind his desk and said, "You both look in need of a drink. Tea?"

Riker shook his head slightly. "Strong black coffee, please, Captain."

"And chocolate for me, please," said Deanna.

The Captain ordered the drinks, plus tea for himself. Then he said, "What can I

do for you two?"

"We've got a problem," said Riker. "It's one of the children."

"Oh?" There was a marked lack of enthusiasm in Picard's voice.

"Dr Selar said that you instructed the medical staff to inform you if they encountered anything unusual about the people rescued in the River Bank regions."

Picard nodded.

"Well, this may be nothing but..." Riker trailed off, letting Troi continue with the explanation.

"It is a boy, approximately ten years of age," Deanna explained. "When he regained consciousness he was very frightened, almost hysterical. I tried to reassure him, but he didn't understand me."

Picard's attention focused at that. "Why not?"

"Evidently," said Riker, "he speaks a language that the universal translator is not programmed to recognise."

"But we have records of all Exan languages," the Captain said. He paused, then said, "He is Exan, I take it?"

"Biologically he is the same species, yes." Counselor Troi took a sip of her drink then continued. "We are concerned about how to deal with him when he regains consciousness again. Also, are there any more like him?"

"And what would you have me do?" asked Picard.

"We wondered whether you might approach the Mayor, and ask him

whether there had been an omission in the information the Exans provided us with?" Deanna's words were almost apologetic; she couldn't help but pick up on Picard's rapidly increasing antipathy towards the man.

Picard agreed. "But I want you with me, Counselor."

"Aye, Captain," acknowledged Troi.

Riker beamed down to the planet's surface with Troi and Picard. His allotted break was over, and he had to return to the rescue effort. He therefore left his fellow officers on the steps of the government offices.

Picard and Troi made their way inside and went up to the top floor, grateful that the lifts were working. They entered Mayor Constatyn's inner sanctum unannounced.

Constatyn rose, hiding his surprise at the intrusion well. "Captain. This is an unexpected honour. And your companion?"

Picard gestured to Troi, saying, "This is Counselor Deanna Troi, my aide." *Make of that what you will*, he thought. *I'm not going to tell you why she is really here.*

"It is a delight to meet you," Constatyn said to Troi. In reply Troi merely gave the Mayor one of her most noncommittal and serene smiles. "Now, what can I do for you both?"

"We have encountered an individual who does not appear to speak any of the languages for which you supplied details," Picard said blandly. "We were hoping that perhaps there might be some obscure language which you had omitted?"

"I do not believe so, Captain Picard." The Mayor appeared to give the matter some thought, then he said, "Of course, Exa is a polyglot planet, and even now we suspect that there might be some undiscovered tribes roaming around our jungles."

Deanna seemed to choke slightly. She turned the sound into a delicate cough and muttered something about dust.

Constatyn was speaking again, "How old is this... person?"

"About ten years, we think."

The Mayor nodded, and said, "I'm sorry. I really don't think that I can help you. Now, if you don't mind, I really am very busy."

"As are we all, Mayor," observed Picard, a little stiffly. It was a long time since anyone had dismissed him quite so abruptly. "Good-day." Counselor Troi followed the Captain out.

Back in the open air Picard looked at the empath and said, "Well?"

"He was lying. But of course you knew that."

"I suspected it," the Captain gently corrected. "I needed you here to be sure."

"I *am* sure. He knows what this language is. And it has nothing to do with tribes in jungles either!"

"A rather absurd notion, I agree. Given the state of Exan technology all such tribes would have been identified several decades ago at the latest."

Deanna stood quietly as the Captain organised their return to the ship. *Back to square one*, she thought bitterly, wondering what to do when the child woke up next

time.

CHAPTER FOUR

Dr Beverly Crusher was tired and frustrated, feelings more than evident in her unusually gaunt looking face and drooping shoulders. She raked her fingers impatiently through her hair and looked at her deputy. "Dammit, Selar, that's the tenth! There must be some explanation!"

The Vulcan looked calmly at the Human, and ignoring the emotional delivery of the Human's words, replied, "Indeed, Doctor. However, unless the Captain has new information for us, or until we can communicate with the children, we cannot know what the explanation is."

"Selar - " Crusher shook her head, irritated. "You're right, of course. It's just that..."

"You are frustrated."

"Yes."

Dr Selar nodded thoughtfully. She wished that she could help. Perhaps if her telepathic powers had been greater she could have melded with one of the children, but she lacked the power and the skill to enable her to do so safely. Besides, without the children's permission, such an act was virtually unthinkable. It was just that the need to do something was becoming greater all the time. The Vulcan resisted the temptation to sigh, realising as she did so that Dr Crusher was not alone in her frustration.

Selar was jolted out of her reverie by the arrival of Captain Jean-Luc Picard and Counselor Troi. The Vulcan had lived among Humans long enough to interpret

correctly the grim set of Picard's mouth and the seriousness of Troi's expression. Crusher, likewise, did not need to be told the outcome of their trip down to the surface of Exa III.

"No luck, then." Crusher's comment came out flatly, a resigned statement.

"No."

Beverly Crusher looked sharply at Picard as the bitterness contained in that one syllable became apparent. Picard interpreted the look correctly and said, "Constatyn knows what the problem is. He's just not prepared to tell us."

"Dammit, Jean-Luc!" Beverly's palm slammed against the table top. "While you were away another nine children woke up. All the same. We can't keep them sedated indefinitely. And there's something else."

"Doctor?"

"Come on. I'll show you." Crusher wagged her finger under Picard's nose in a 'follow me' gesture. She led the way into the main ward with Picard, Troi and Sellar following close behind.

Troi recognised the child at whose bed they halted as being the one who had been in so much distress earlier. The Betazoid shuddered at the memory, disturbed by the thought of having to experience the child's torment again.

"Look," Crusher said, pointing at one of the displays on the diagnostic chart.

Captain Picard did not understand the significance of what the Doctor was showing him, and he said so.

Crusher almost smiled as she said, "This read-out gives some indication of levels of trace metals in the patient's

body. In these children the figure is somewhat elevated as compared to the rest of the Exans we've examined. At first, we thought it was just an anomaly." Crusher looked across at Sellar, who nodded in agreement. Picard and Troi still did not see where Crusher was leading. "But then," the Doctor continued, "we found this."

She flicked a switch, causing a view-screen to come to life on the wall behind her. On it was a graphic representation of a small spherical device.

"Doctor?" Picard queried.

"All the children who don't speak Exan have one. No-one else. Sellar checked."

Troi and Picard looked at the Vulcan doctor in wordless interrogation. The Vulcan inclined her head in agreement.

Picard asked, "What does it do?"

"Ah, well," said Crusher. "We don't know. But it doesn't seem to have any physiological function, so I would guess that it's some kind of an identification mark."

Picard's face grew grim at Crusher's words. "We need to know what it's for. And I'll bet Mayor Constatyn knows. Counselor? Any ideas?"

Deanna Troi thought for a few moments, then said, "I think we should invite the Mayor to dinner."

"Counselor?" Picard asked again, this time in surprise.

"He is very much on his guard at present, Captain. Perhaps in a more informal environment we might get some answers."

Picard did not relish the idea of spending an evening in the presence of the Mayor, but he had to agree that the Counselor's suggestion had merit.

"Very well, Counselor. Make it so.

Extract from the Captain's Log:

We have been in orbit around Exa III now for just over twenty-four hours, and the rescue teams are to be congratulated upon the amount of ground they have covered in this time. Similarly, the Medical Staff upon the Enterprise have been tireless in their efforts to keep up with the numbers of incoming wounded.

It is unfortunate that this mission, which should have been straightforward, is being hampered by the indigenous government. Mayor Constatyn seems to have been less than honest in his dealings with us, and appears to be withholding vital information.

Upon Counselor Troi's recommendation, I have invited Mayor Constatyn and his secretary, Loris, to tour the Enterprise, and to dine. I hope that they will be more forthcoming aboard the ship than they have been thus far on the planet.

Extract from the Captain's Personal Log:

...I certainly hope that the Counselor is right. I have more worthwhile things to do under these present circumstances than to mollycoddle a couple of self-serving politicians...

Captain Jean-Luc Picard held out his hand as Constatyn and Loris stepped down from the transporter platform. "Welcome aboard the Enterprise."

"Thank you, Captain." Constatyn glanced around the small room, then looked back at Picard and shook his hand warily. He did not trust the Captain, and the doubts that he'd felt upon receiving the dinner and tour invitation resurfaced. Constatyn thought he knew what Picard was after and wondered whether he had been wise to come. Still, the chance to visit the state-of-the-art starship, and the political gains to be had from visiting all the Exan injured had to compensate for at least some of his doubts. All he could do was resolve to keep his guard up, his wits about him, and hope for the best. Constatyn put on his best politician's smile, and kept his thoughts and emotions well hidden.

Loris was less adept at hiding his feelings than the Mayor, and his face was alive with wonder as he followed Picard and Constatyn around the ship. He was astonished at the sheer size of the Enterprise. Moreover, he was awed by the technological wonders available to its crew, several centuries ahead of anything that Exa could offer. *It is no wonder, Loris mused, that the Enterprise's rescue teams were able to pinpoint quake survivors so much more readily than the Exan teams.*

The last port of call before dinner on Picard's tour was the shuttle bay. Constatyn seemed in his element here, exuding charm, and seeming very interested in every Exan he spoke to. Crusher eyed him warily from across the 'ward' where she was busy tending to one of her patients. *He's a real pro at this stuff, she thought wryly. Pity he's such a bastard.*

Picard noticed the sardonic look in Crusher's eyes, and he hoped that she would keep her most unflattering

thoughts to herself. It wouldn't do to upset the Mayor now.

"Ah," Picard said. "Dr Crusher. A moment, please."

Crusher thrust her hands deep into her lab coat pockets, and approached the Captain.

"Mayor Constatyn. Secretary Loris," Picard said, as the Exans came within earshot, "I'd like to introduce you to Dr Beverly Crusher, the Enterprise's Chief Medical Officer. She is in charge here."

Constatyn looked at the red-head and turned the full power of his charm in her direction. "Doctor. It is truly a pleasure to meet you. You are doing some splendid work here. I thank you. And Exa thanks you."

"Exa is welcome," Crusher replied, trying to keep the irony out of her voice. Even so, Picard could not help but notice the emphasis the Doctor had placed on the first word, and he threw her a warning glance.

"I trust that everything is going well, Doctor? No problems?"

Constatyn heard Picard's bland tone, and realised that this was the moment he had been guarding himself against. All his instincts cried 'set-up'. Crusher's next words confirmed his suspicions.

"We're having a problem with some of the children, Captain. We can't communicate with them, and it is causing difficulties." She glanced in the Mayor's direction as she tried to gauge his reaction.

His expression didn't change as he said smoothly, "The Captain and I discussed this earlier. I wish I could help you."

"And there is something else. All the kids seem to be fitted with some kind of transponder. A tracking device, we think. But we can't figure out why. We've asked a few of the Exans who are conscious, but they don't seem to know what it might be for, either.

"I don't suppose you could help, could you?" Crusher looked at the Mayor and Picard silently congratulated the Doctor on her acting ability. Her expression was one of pure concern and puzzlement for her patients, with no hint of their suspicion that Constatyn might have a role to play in any of this.

Constatyn decided that he had to say something. Anything that might sound plausible was better than saying nothing at all. "Very well, Captain, Doctor. I will tell you what I can, but it is a rather shameful matter. Perhaps we might go somewhere more... private... to discuss this?"

"Very well, Mayor. Perhaps over dinner? Doctor, will you join us?"

Crusher looked torn, but said, "I think I'd better stay here, Captain. I'm sure you'll keep me posted."

"Of course, Doctor. Gentlemen. If you'll follow me?"

Counselor Deanna Troi was already in the VIP lounge when Picard and his guests arrived. "Ah, Counselor," Picard said, "the Mayor is about to confide in us."

"Oh?" Troi turned darkly curious eyes towards the politician. She tentatively sampled the atmosphere and read scepticism from Picard, relief from Loris, and continuing duplicity from Constatyn. The Counselor held back a sigh, certain of

one thing; whatever Constatyn elected to tell them now, it would not be the truth.

The meal was simple but impressive, with salads, fruits and sea-foods from a range of UFP worlds. The wine was French. After a few mouthfuls, Picard verbally nudged Constatyn into giving his explanation.

"They are runaways," the Mayor said.

Loris coughed violently, and dropped his fork with a clatter.

"Are you all right?" Troi asked solicitously, aware that Loris's surprise at the Mayor's statement was genuine. *He really expected the Mayor to say something else,* Troi thought in wonder. *He thought Constatyn was going to tell us what is really going on!*

Loris nodded several times, and sipped from his wine glass. "My apologies," he said finally. "Carry on, please."

"Runaways?" Picard queried.

"Yes, Captain. There are about one hundred such children in Central City. They refuse to stay at home, and so we tag them. At least then, if any parents want to know how their particular child is, we can track the child, and inform the parents."

"Laudable, I'm sure," Picard said neutrally. Deanna turned her dark gaze towards Picard, aware that Picard knew Constatyn was still lying; she could sense Picard's annoyance at the Mayor's continuing deceit. "Why should you find that so embarrassing?"

"No-one likes to admit their weaknesses to outsiders. That we have such unruly elements among our population is a cause of great sorrow to

us. And also... well. Frankly, Captain, how do you think these children survive?"

"Tell us," the Captain invited.

"Theft, principally. Sometimes prostitution. It's shameful, Captain. It is not a situation with which the Exan Government is happy."

"No, indeed." Picard glanced across at the Counselor.

"Mayor," Troi said. "Please tell me, how does this explain their non-comprehension of the Exan language?"

"Quite honestly, Counselor, I have no idea. I can only suppose it's sheer bloody mindedness. Or something. I really couldn't tell you."

"Secretary?" Troi asked, not expecting a response.

Loris shifted uncomfortably in his seat, ill-at-ease at suddenly becoming the centre of attention. "Sorry, Counselor. I can't help you either," he said stiffly.

"Hmph. So the mystery remains. More salad, anyone?"

CHAPTER FIVE

The old woman blinked her eyes open.

"Hello. Welcome aboard the Enterprise. My name is Keiko Ishikawa." The Oriental woman smiled down at the patient.

"I am Mitcheka Korl." The Exan's eyes closed, then she opened them again, more alert this time, as if she'd suddenly remembered something important.

"Where's Kitia?"

"Who is Kitia?" Keiko asked.

"A young girl. She was sleeping in my basement when the earthquake hit."

"I'm sorry, but I don't know off-hand. I'd have to check for you. Is she a relation?" Keiko asked sympathetically.

"No. Just a... friend."

"I'll try to find out for you. I'll be back in a minute."

"Thank you."

Keiko walked to the nearest work-station, picked up a PADD, and quickly sorted through the records until she found what she was looking for. Then her eyebrows rose in surprise as the significance registered. She set off to find Dr Crusher.

The old lady was surprised to see Keiko return with a Doctor, and she immediately feared the worst. Mitcheka's eyes widened and she said, "Oh, no! Don't tell me..."

Crusher forced herself to smile encouragingly through her fatigue. "It's all right. Kitia had a couple of broken ribs, and a broken leg. However, we've set them..."

"Thank you," the old lady whispered, sighing with relief.

The Doctor spoke again. "We are having some problems..."

"Problems?" the Exan queried. "What kind of problems?"

"We can't communicate with her. She doesn't speak any Exan languages we know of."

Mitcheka nodded her head ponderously, seemingly unsurprised at this revelation. "I will speak with her."

"Can you speak with her?" Crusher asked, startled.

"After a fashion. Where is she?"

Crusher said, "I'm sorry, but she's asleep at the moment. We had to sedate her when she woke up."

"Sedate her? Why?"

"She panicked, and we couldn't reassure her. She was quite hysterical. However..." Crusher trailed off.

"However?"

"If you're feeling strong enough, you can help us." Crusher waited to see what the old woman's response to that suggestion might be before she continued. Seeing Mitcheka waiting expectantly, she resumed. "First off, if you would speak some of this language, we could programme the universal translator. It would be of enormous help to us as we keep finding more kids who speak it. However, without suitable reference points, we haven't been able to build up a translation matrix."

"I can do that, certainly. What else?"

"You clearly know about these children. Who they are. Where they come from. Anything you could tell us would be appreciated. Please?" The last word was added as Crusher saw the Exan's reluctance in her eyes and frozen facial expression. Clearly her instinctive reaction was to decline to help. "If you'd just consider it?" Crusher prompted gently.

The old woman spoke doubtfully. "I'll think about it."

At least, Crusher thought, that's not a refusal.

Keiko sat with Mitcheka Korl for an hour, talking with the Exan, prompting her to translate phrases into Anchai. Finally, as the universal translator efficiently manipulated Keiko's words, spoken in standard Federation English, Mitcheka Korl pronounced it perfect.

Keiko smiled, and thanked the Exan saying, "Dr Crusher will be very pleased!"

Deanna Troi and Captain Picard bade their guests good-bye, and watched as the transporter effect took them. As the last of the sparkle died away, Troi turned to face Picard and said, "You are pleased to see them go."

"Was I that obvious?"

"Only to me," Deanna replied, smiling slightly.

"Well. That wasn't very informative, was it?" Picard's irritation skittered at the edge of Deanna's perceptions.

"Loris is not happy," she observed.

"Nor am I!" Picard said. Then, more calmly, he asked, "In what way isn't he happy?"

"He thought the Mayor was going to tell us the truth at dinner. And when he didn't, he was surprised, and upset."

"But he followed Constatyn's lead."

"Yes. He did."

At that moment, Jean-Luc Picard's communicator chirruped softly. He

acknowledged the signal, and heard Beverly Crusher's disembodied voice say, "Captain, do you have a minute?" It was a tactful way of checking that the visitors had left.

"What is it, Doctor?" Picard asked.

"We've found something interesting."

"Very well, Doctor. I'm on my way. Counselor Troi is here with me. Do you need her, as well?"

"Yes, Captain. I think Deanna should hear this, too."

Picard and Troi traded looks, and headed for the nearest turbo-lift.

The shuttlebay was as busy as ever when the Captain and the Counselor arrived. Instinctively, though, they knew to make their way into the farthest corner and the work-station that the CMO had adopted as her own. Dr Crusher and Keiko Ishikawa stood waiting for them, both women wearing looks of happy expectancy on their faces.

"Well, Doctor?" Picard said, sensing the new atmosphere of optimism.

"We have a translation matrix for the kids' language!"

"That's wonderful!" Troi exclaimed. "Beverly, how did you do it?"

"Not me," Beverly Crusher shook her head. "You can thank Keiko for that."

"Keiko?"

"Miss Ishikawa?"

Happily, Keiko explained about Mitcheka Korl, and her ability to speak the Anchai language. Keiko's enthusiasm did not diminish until she said more

soberly, "Ms Korl has helped us enormously, Captain, but she is extremely reluctant to tell us more about the children. She won't tell us where they come from, though I'm pretty certain that she knows."

"Do you think she'd tell me?" Picard asked.

"No, Captain. I don't think so. Whatever it is that's keeping her from talking seems to be pretty deep-rooted." Crusher gave a small sigh. "In any case, now we can communicate with the children, I was hoping that maybe one of them could tell us something. Deanna," she continued, "I want you to be there when they wake up."

"Of course, Doctor."

Picard thought for a moment. "Is there any way you could wake the children now?"

Crusher frowned and replied, "They're sedated, Captain. Certainly I could do it, but it's not something I'd recommend. In any case, Kitia's sedative should be wearing off about now."

"Kitia?" Troi asked.

"The child Mitcheka Korl asked about," Keiko explained.

"Ah. Yes. Well, Doctor, Counselor. Miss Ishikawa. I'll leave you to it. Let me know what happens."

"Certainly, Captain."

Kitia woke up an hour later. Counselor Troi was waiting at her bedside as she did so, mental shields braced to protect her from the waves of panic she knew the child would

broadcast. The Counselor watched as Kitia's eyelids flickered, then opened. Deanna said to the girl, "You are safe. You are on the Starship Enterprise." Mercifully, the words seemed to translate reasonably well. 'Starship', for some reason, remained in Federation Standard. The Counselor continued, saying, "My name is Deanna Troi. Do you remember what happened to you?"

The child's panic was there, but muted. Deanna took one of Kitia's hands in hers, and patted it gently, soothingly.

Kitia's eyes rested on Deanna's face, and she seemed reassured by the gentleness she saw there. Tentatively, she said, "The house fell on me."

"Yes. And we came to help. We rescued you."

"I don't really remember that part. I remember a man pulling me out from the rubble. I think. Maybe I dreamed that bit."

"Why do you say that, Kitia?"

"He didn't look like you or me."

"And how did he look, Kitia?"

"He was pale. With yellow eyes. Odd."

The Counselor smiled slightly. "You did not dream him, Kitia. That would have been Data."

"I didn't know people could look like that," Kitia said softly.

That was interesting, Deanna noted. Exa III had lots of off-world contacts, yet Kitia apparently had no idea that non-Human-looking species existed. Deanna suddenly realised that she would have to tread very carefully here. The Counselor bit down on the comment that had sprung to mind - *Just wait till you meet Lt*

Worf! - and said instead, "How do you feel?"

Kitia shrugged slightly. "Tired. And my leg and ribs itch." The child frowned suddenly.

"What is it, Kitia?" Deanna asked.

"I was hurt," Kitia said. "It doesn't hurt now. What happened?" Troi sensed bewilderment, and an increase in the background panic warned the Betazoid to watch the child carefully.

"You had broken ribs and a broken leg. The doctor cured them. You're all right now."

"How... how long have I been asleep?" Kitia had a hazy idea that broken bones took a number of weeks to heal.

"We found you last night."

"But..."

"What is it?"

Kitia voiced her doubts about broken bones healing fast. It was, Troi noted, another inconsistency. How could a child living in a society with a level of development equivalent to that of late twenty-first century Earth have only a twentieth century, or earlier, knowledge of medicine? Troi was puzzled.

The Counselor needed answers. She remembered the Mayor's story about the children being runaways, and she decided that this was the first issue that should be addressed.

"Kitia, do you want to tell your parents that you are here?"

"Can you do that?" An expression of scared wonder and disbelief popped up onto Kitia's face.

"Certainly. If you tell me their address."

"Oh." Kitia's face fell. "I don't know where they are."

"Kitia? What do you mean, you don't know where they are?"

"I... I just don't."

"Well, could you describe where they live? The street, house, whatever? Maybe we might find the house that way."

Fresh hope pierced Kitia's mind. She closed her eyes, and thought back. Kitia described Main Street with its pitted mud road and its ten wooden houses. She described the family smallholding with its two storeys and its long covered veranda, the stables and the barn. She described the flowers and the trees. Once started, Kitia found herself unable to stop. Tears flowed down her face and the waves of her homesickness crashed against Counselor Troi's shields.

Deanna listened to Kitia's description of the lilac sky above her home village, and knew for certain that the place she was describing was nowhere on the planet below. Finally, Kitia quieted. Troi took the girl in her arms and rocked her gently, trying to sooth her.

"Kitia," Troi asked eventually, "can you tell me how you came to be in Central City?"

"Well, I guess so..."

"Would you mind if Dr Crusher and Captain Picard heard this, too?"

"I suppose not."

"Thank you."

Counselor Troi summoned the other

two officers, and together they listened to an incredible story.

CHAPTER SIX

Not even the moon looked the same.

Kitia was lost, alone and far from home. The child had woken some hours earlier to find herself lying on open ground, surrounded by houses. At least, Kitia assumed that they were houses: the configuration of windows and doors was correct even if all the detailing was wrong. Even the material from which they were constructed looked strange. The buildings looked as though they were cast in stone rather than being made out of wood. They were beyond her experience, as were the great grey pathway in front of them, the plants and trees, and even the smells.

Kitia picked herself up, dusted herself down, and, in that curiously detached way experienced in dreams, wondered what she should do next. She chose a direction at random and set off. Unfamiliar with walking on anything harder than caked earth, she marvelled at the way her boot heels clacked as they struck the tarmac when she walked.

The sun rose higher in the sky, and Kitia wondered at the harsh blueness above her, not at all like the pastel shades of home. The child revelled in the warmth of the sun's rays, and danced a few steps, enjoying the novelty of this new place.

The road Kitia walked along was empty so early in the morning, and she made good progress along it. She gradually became aware of the buildings becoming taller and grander as she ventured further from the square in which she had awoken. The streets became noisier, too, until Kitia turned a corner and suddenly found herself on a major routeway.

Kitia's eyes grew round with sudden fright as she saw boxes running along the hard surface

at unimaginable speeds, hurtling who knew where. Alarmed, she hunched herself against the nearest wall as far from the monstrosities as she could get. Then she turned tail and fled back the way she had come.

But now, even these streets were no longer the same, and they were also filling up with moving boxes, and people crowded the pavements. Kitia panicked and ran on, trying to flee from the incessant noise and hubbub which assaulted her senses.

The child soon realised that she was lost. Running in the rapidly warming day made her hot and thirsty, and she decided that this dream was really no fun at all. She wanted to wake up. She willed herself to wake up.

Nothing happened.

Kitia began to feel increasingly afraid, wondering if she were trapped inside her nightmare.

She slowed to a walk, and made her way dejectedly through the city until she came to an area of parkland. She found herself a tree to shelter beneath, and she tried to think things through.

She remembered going to bed. She remembered lying coiled up in her quilt, listening to the mimic birds singing through her open window. And she remembered waking up in the park.

Kitia told herself that was impossible. In her experience, no such place as this existed. Therefore, this had to be a dream. But if it were a dream, she would have woken up by now, in which case it had to be real. In which case-. Kitia's mind was going round and round in circles. She was also beginning to feel hungry.

There was a food salesman nearby, Kitia noticed. She searched through her pockets and found a few tarnished coins there, enough for a stick of bread and some salad, at least.

Kitia made her way to the stall, and said, "A salad sandwich, please." She held out the coins.

The stall holder gazed at the proffered money, laughed harshly, and said something completely incomprehensible. Kitia tried again. At this, the stall holder laughed harder, and waved his hands at her in a shooing motion. Even more bemused, Kitia turned and slowly walked back to her tree, glancing over her shoulder several times as she did so.

She remained seated for much of the afternoon, afraid to venture further. Several people looked in her direction and pointed, but no-one approached her. Finally, as dusk was falling, and the temperature began to drop, Kitia summoned up enough courage to go in search of food again. This time, she had only gone a few steps when she heard some young men shouting, "Anchaiki! Anchaiki!" She turned to face them, recognising the word as her people's name for themselves, relieved to find friendly faces in the place at last -

- only to find that the shouters were picking up stones to hurl at her. She ran away, and they gave chase. They herded her through the streets, laughing and cat-calling all the time. Only when Kitia was totally exhausted, and felt ready to drop, did her pursuers grow tired of the sport.

Kitia huddled into a doorway, shivering with fright. Gradually she recovered herself enough to begin to take in her surroundings. This area of town looked squalid and run down, with masonry falling from the buildings, and half smashed windows hanging in their frames.

Paint peeled on the doors, and litter was strewn across the street. Vermin squeaked and squealed as they romped through it.

It was dark now, and the night chill cut through Kitia's clothing. She was tired, frightened and alone. She watched as the moons rose above the houses, and she remembered that she hadn't eaten since before she'd gone to bed.

Kitia cried.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Commander William Riker and Lt Commander Geordi La Forge sank into their seats in Ten Forward and sighed. Thanks to endless hours of hard work and dedication, the bulk of the rescue work was complete. The Away Teams were gradually returning from Exa III to the Enterprise, their members exhausted but contented at the thought of a job well done. Only indefatigable stalwarts like Data and Worf remained below now, tidying up the loose threads of the relief effort. They, too, would return soon.

Riker and La Forge had only taken short breaks to eat and try and relax since the Enterprise's arrival at Exa III, and they had barely slept. Riker wryly thought of the break he'd tried to take with Deanna - was it only thirty hours before? - and reflected that it had proved to be anything but relaxing. He wondered how Deanna was coping now: he hadn't seen her since, and he was behind with all the ship's news. *Never mind*, he thought. *There'll be plenty of time to catch up on it all, and right now I'm too tired to worry about it.* Riker smothered a yawn.

Geordi picked up on Riker's gesture and had to yawn in response. He shrugged apologetically and said, "Sorry, Commander. I'm too shattered to be good company right now."

"You and me both. Well, I'm going to have some of Guinan's excellent chicken soup, and then I'm going to get some sack time."

"Hmmm. Sounds good to me." Geordi's ready smile seemed somewhat muted by his fatigue.

Guinan, as usual, sensed that she was needed, and wordlessly presented the two officers with their meals. For the thousandth time, Geordi wondered how she did that.

"Commander," Geordi said, after the soup had begun to revive him and as the vague notion which had been fluttering around in the back of his mind suddenly coalesced into a concrete idea, "how would you feel about helping to organise a birthday party for Data?"

"For Data?!" Riker said in consternation. "What does Data need with a birthday party?"

Geordi listened to Riker's amazement. Sometimes the First Officer seemed uncaring or dismissive of Data's needs and aspirations. La Forge found himself remembering an occasion when Riker had laughed at the notion of Geordi trying to help Data learn to paint.

However, he knew that despite the First Officer's abrupt and occasionally insensitive comments Riker cared deeply for their colleague, and he would give Geordi's suggestion all due consideration.

The Engineer calmly explained about the conversation about birthdays he'd had with the android. He finished by noting, "It was bothering him, I could tell."

"But Data doesn't have a birthday. You said so, yourself."

"Yeah. But what I was thinking was that we could take the day that the Tripoli found him as his birthday, and calculate from that."

Riker thought for a few moments. "Sounds good to me," he said finally. "After all, Tasha described it as Data's 'birth', and he didn't dispute it, did he?"

"No. He didn't. What do you think?"

"You think it'd please him?"

"Yeah."

"Well, why not? Let's do it."

Shortly thereafter, Riker and Geordi wound their weary way to their respective quarters, and sleep.

Deanna Troi, Beverly Crusher and Jean-Luc Picard sat in the Captain's ready room and talked. Picard knew, despite the haggard look around the Doctor's eyes which spoke eloquently of her exhaustion, that Crusher would insist on being up all night. It was for that reason he had actually insisted on the Doctor's presence at this meeting; he'd even threatened to pull rank on her. Crusher might not have realised it yet, but Picard was making certain that she took some sort of a break from her work. Besides, Picard valued her opinion.

Counselor Troi spoke. "Captain, I am sure that the Anchai children are *not* native to Exa III. I'm also sure that wherever they do come from, technology is well behind that of the Exans."

"Doctor?" Picard invited Beverly's comments.

"The children and the Exans are definitely of the same species, Captain." The Doctor wrapped her hands round her mug and inhaled the steam and aroma of her coffee, almost as if she could draw strength from it.

"Presumably," Picard observed, "there were links between earlier generations of the two populations. Mitcheka Korl speaks Anchai, which implies that there must be some linkage."

Crusher sighed softly.

Troi pointed out, "That's true, Captain, but she is still reluctant to confide in us. We cannot force her to tell us what she knows."

"We need answers. But all we get are more questions!" Picard frowned with frustration. "Where do these children come from? How come they are here?"

"I have been thinking about the first question, Captain," Deanna said. "If we cannot get the information from the Exans themselves - and they are certainly reluctant to help us - perhaps we could get it from the children. If we could get enough of the children to talk to us, we could perhaps programme the holodeck to resemble their homeworld. When we get a good likeness, we might find a planet in the computer's records which matches."

"That's quite a long shot, Counselor. It'll only work if their homeworld is in the explored part of the galaxy," Picard pointed out. "However, it does seem a reasonable idea. Will you work on that, Counselor?"

"Certainly, Captain. Would it be all right if Data gave me a hand when he returns? And perhaps Wesley, too?" The Counselor knew that Wesley Crusher had been helping out by manning the con while the Enterprise was in orbit - a rather undemanding task, but someone had to do it - and he had been kept away from the most dangerous aspects of the rescue. The young Acting Ensign was chafing at not being allowed to do something 'really useful.' Perhaps this would be his chance.

"Agreed, Counselor. I'll talk to Mr Data upon his return. I'll leave you to sort things out with Mr Crusher."

"Yes, Captain." Deanna stood up to leave.

"Oh, and Counselor?"

"Yes, Captain?"

"Get some sleep first."

"Aye, sir. Perhaps you should, as well."

Picard's usually stern face softened slightly. "Noted and logged, Counselor."

"What about me?" Crusher asked in mock annoyance at not having been included in these recommendations.

Picard's amusement filtered through Deanna Troi's shields and she found herself smiling as the Captain said, "I know better than to try to tell you to do anything." More softly he added, "There wouldn't be any point in my telling you to rest, would there?"

"No, Captain. I guess not."

"Just... don't overdo it, Beverly."

Deliberately imitating his earlier tone, the Doctor replied, "Noted and logged, Jean-Luc." Crusher followed Troi on to the main bridge.

Deanna Troi tried to rest, but she was too keyed up to sleep. When a page came requesting her presence in sickbay, she found herself relieved that she no longer needed to try to relax. She got up, threw on a dress, and made her way through the ship's corridors.

When he entered the ward, Secretary Loris was surprised to recognise

Counselor Troi sitting beside a child's bed. He knew that it was three thirty in the morning, ship's time, and yet here she was, sitting ramrod straight, showing no signs of sleepiness. Loris stifled a yawn at the thought.

Deanna had clearly sensed his presence by this time because she stood up, and turned to greet the new arrival. "Secretary Loris," she said softly, so as not to disturb any of the sleeping patients. "How may I be of assistance?"

Loris found himself looking into the beautiful black eyes and gentle face of the Betazoid woman. "Counselor Troi," he said flatly, "what are you doing here?" It was not a proper greeting, and the Secretary felt embarrassed about his words, realising that it really wasn't any of his business.

Troi answered, anyway. "This child - Roja - woke up. She wished to talk to someone, and I was available. She has only just gone back to sleep." A slight frown puckered Deanna's brow. "What brings *you* here at this time, sir?"

Loris sighed deeply. "I was hoping to speak with your Dr Crusher. I have some information for her."

Deanna looked at Loris steadily as she asked, "And did you have this information yesterday evening?"

The Counselor didn't need to see Loris fidget uncomfortably to know he was embarrassed, ashamed even. "I... Well, I..." The Exan's words petered out. Then, suddenly, explosively, he said, "Oh! All right, *dammit!* Yes, I knew!"

Deanna, fascinated by the outburst, said, "Dr Crusher is in surgery at the moment. Can I help?"

"I... I don't know."

"Perhaps, if you told me what the problem is?"

Deanna's black eyes looked directly into Loris's blue ones, and the man felt as though he was being drawn into their inky depths. He felt as though he'd find sanctuary there; felt as though he could lose himself. He shook himself mentally, and stared at the woman with an expression akin to fear on his face, wondering what she was doing to him.

"What are you?" he breathed.

Deanna could have chosen to interpret the question in any of a variety of ways, but she knew what Loris meant. She said, "I am an empath. I'm half Betazoid."

"Oh," said Loris, not knowing the first thing about Betazoids, or where they came from. 'Empath', though, was a word he understood.

"If you wish to see Dr Crusher, you may wait for her through there." Deanna gestured towards Beverly's office.

"I... No. I'll talk to you, if it's all right. I can't stay for long."

Deanna sensed the man's uncertainty, and his fear. She decided that their conversation would be more relaxed if conducted elsewhere.

Ten Forward was quiet as was often the case in the middle of the night. Deanna collected two drinks from the bar and then joined Loris at a table in the corner. He took the proffered glass but did not drink. Instead he settled it on the table and nervously twiddled it between his fingers.

Deanna watched for a few moments, then gently she reminded him, "You said you were in a hurry."

"Yes, I did, didn't I?" He stalled again.

"This is difficult for you." Deanna placed a hand on his arm, and the Exan took his gaze away from his glass, moving it towards her face. Whatever he saw there must have reassured him, because he relaxed visibly.

"The Doctor wanted to know why some of the children were wearing... 'transponders' I think was the word she used."

"Yes."

"Mayor Constatyn said it was because they are runaways, and it is the only way to keep track of their whereabouts."

"Yes, I know about that," Deanna reminded him.

"He was lying." There. He'd finally said it. And, he realised, looking at the Counselor's face, she had known that, too. "You knew?"

"Of course." Deanna smiled slightly. "I have been able to speak with several of the children since our last meeting. While their stories seem, at first hearing, rather improbable, they are all very similar. And none of them speaks of having run away."

Loris pinched his lips together, and nodded miserably. "Maybe, if you know all this already, you won't need what I've brought you."

"Please, tell me anyway."

Loris swallowed, and began. Once started, he couldn't stop.

"The children... well... There are all sorts of stories about where they come from, but I can't tell you much about that. Once the children arrive in Central City,

though... The transponders are for tracking the kids. The Mayor was right about that, at least. But it's *why* the children are tagged that he lied about.

"Not many people know about the Anchai Game. At least, I don't think so. It's one of those things that the rich and powerful get involved with because they've done everything else. No-one's interested in the kids, you see, so they're fair game. They can be hunted and chased through the city, and -

"Anything else I tell you is speculation. But if you think it might help?"

"Yes. Anything could help us. For example, where do you *think* the children come from? And... could you tell me some more about this... Game?" Troi did her best to keep her voice even, and prevent the revulsion she felt from showing.

"Like I said, there are lots of rumours about where the kids come from. The most common idea seems to be that the children come from off-planet somewhere. And that's possible, I suppose. Exa has seeded several colonies in the past century, so I guess that they could have come from one of those. But then... you'd have thought somebody would notice kids going missing. And for starships to bring them to Exa... Well, no-one on Exa has access to private craft; they're just too expensive. So that means that someone either in Government, or in one of the corporations would have to be involved.

"Still, I think the idea of them being off-worlders is just as likely, or unlikely, as their being Exan. I mean, there's that business about the language, and... How did you manage to get access to the language, anyway?" Loris shrugged, clearly confused. Deanna sensed that

Loris knew no more about the children: he was hiding nothing now.

"And the Game?" Deanna prompted gently.

"The Game..." Loris, for the first time in several minutes looked reluctant to say anything more. But then he took a deep breath and resumed his narrative. "The Game has hard and fast rules. No child may be chased more than three times in a week, and the number of hours a player may devote to the game is limited, too." Clearly the look on Deanna's face was giving away far more than she intended because Loris suddenly exploded, "Look, I know it's barbaric! But it's very hard to stop something like this. If only the most powerful citizens have access to the relevant information, well, no-one else is ever going to know enough to campaign for change. The people who *do* know what's going on are precisely those who play the Game anyway!"

"And you. How do you know so much?"

Loris almost squirmed. "Please," he said. "Don't make me answer that. I swear I don't play the Game myself. But it's more than my life's worth to tell you who does." The secretary's face contorted into an expression of abject misery.

"Then," Deanna asked softly, "could you tell me one thing? Does Mayor Constatyn know what you've told me about the Game?"

Loris nodded miserably. "He was angry when I sent the distress call. He said that if the Federation found out about the Anchai Game our economy would be destroyed because of sanctions and things. And it'd all be my fault."

"You sent the distress signal?"

"Yes."

Well, thought Deanna, *that accounts for much of Constatyn's stubbornness and intransigence.* She risked another question. "Does Mayor Constatyn know that you're here now?"

"Oh, no! Of course not!" Deanna noted Loris's emphatic reply. "And I'd be... grateful... if you didn't tell him."

"I'll do my best to keep it our secret." The Betazoid was tempted to cross her fingers as she said this. At the very least, she knew she would have to share her new-found knowledge with the other senior officers aboard the Enterprise.

"Look, I must go now," Loris said. "I don't want to be missed. It's not likely at this time of day, but you never know." He shrugged helplessly.

"I'll show you to the transporter room. And Loris." The little man looked at the Counselor. "Thank you for telling me all this."

"That's okay. I... I feel better now, somehow. I guess it's a relief to finally tell someone."

Deanna nodded sombrely.

Troi went directly to Captain Picard's quarters once Loris had gone. She was not surprised to find him awake and fully clothed. After all she had not been able to sleep either, in spite of her fatigue.

Picard could hardly believe the story that the Counselor told him. "The children are *kidnapped*? For a *game*?"

Troi nodded unhappily. "Loris didn't say so, but I think Constatyn is involved. I mean, he knows about the Game, but I

suspect that he is actively involved in it somehow. Loris is scared of him, you know. He's also scared that someone will find out about his visit."

"Hmm." Picard paced across his living area, then paused in front of one of the ports.

He stared out at Exa III and thought bitterly of the sickness in its society.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Lt Commander Data and the rest of his team stepped down from the transporter platform. Their faces and uniforms were covered in grey dust, causing O'Brien to do a slight double-take. He could not remember ever having seen the android look dishevelled before.

"Ah, Commander," O'Brien said, recovering himself. "The Captain said he wanted a word with you when you beamed aboard."

"Thank you, Chief. I shall go directly."

"Ah, sir?"

"Yes, Mr O'Brien?"

"Perhaps you should have a shower first?"

Data looked down at himself, and decided that the Irishman had a point. He followed the last of his team out of the transporter room, tapped his communicator and explained the delay to the Captain. Then he headed off to his quarters.

"Mr Data! Come in!"

Data walked forward and stood in front of Picard's desk. The Human looked at the android - now clean and tidy once more - and wondered again at his posture. Even when Data was relaxed he looked stiff, and there were times, like now, when Picard felt his back ache in sympathy with the android's natural rigidity. *If only*, Picard thought, *Data could learn to look relaxed*. "Please sit down."

Data made his way over to the couch and sat. Picard followed suit.

"I have been hearing about your work down below. You are to be congratulated: your efficiency was noteworthy, as ever."

"Thank you, sir."

"Mayor Constatyn has complained about you, you know."

"Sir?"

Picard noted the bemused look on Data's face, and wondered if his last comment hadn't been a little unwise. Now Data would want an explanation, and just now Picard had neither the time nor inclination to educate the android. "He thought you were being *too* efficient."

"Sir?" said Data again, clearly none the wiser.

"Mayor Constatyn didn't want us to find out about the children in the River Bank Districts. You have been responsible for rescuing a good third of those aboard, and Constatyn is not happy." Picard held up his hand in a 'not now' gesture as he saw Data's mouth open for what was clearly going to be a question. "I suggest you review the ship's logs for the last couple of days."

"Aye, sir." The android moved, thinking that the interview was over.

"Data. Sit down."

The android resumed his previous position.

"I want you to work with Counselor Troi. She'll brief you fully, but basically we need to know where the children come from. They are not native to Exa III."

"Aye, sir." Data was still puzzled by much of the conversation, but he recognised that it was now at an end. He thus made his way onto the bridge and looked up the records Picard had suggested, hoping that they might clear up a few of his queries. He then contacted the ship's Counselor, and agreed to meet her in one of the Enterprise's classrooms.

Data blinked his yellow eyes at the sight before him. Thirty-two children, ages ranging from about seven to fourteen Earth years, sat cross-legged on the floor, speaking to each other in excited voices. Deanna Troi stood off to one side with Wesley Crusher, watching them intently.

Troi could sense the fear that the children felt at the abrupt change in their surroundings, but for the moment at least their doubts and fears were overwhelmed as each child rediscovered the delight of finding others with whom they could communicate.

Several children glanced in Data's direction as the classroom door hissed shut behind him. Their heads stilled and their words dried up as they took in Data's unusual appearance.

As others became aware of the hush that had fallen close to the classroom's entrance, they turned their heads to see what all the fuss was about, then they too

fell silent.

Deanna spoke. "You have all met me. But I do not believe that any of you have been introduced to Lt Commander Data." Troi gestured in the android's direction.

A small voice piped up from the floor, "He's all *yellow*!"

Wesley Crusher chuckled softly at this description of his friend. Deanna said, "Data is an android." The translator couldn't cope with the last word, and it, like 'starship' earlier, remained in English.

"Android?" queried one of the children.

Troi, mindful of the apparently limited technical knowledge of the children, decided that evasion was probably the best way to deal with the query. "There are many different types of life-form within the Federation. Data comes from a planet a long way from here, in an area of space called the Omicron Theta Sector."

"Wow," said a young lad under his breath, and he seemed to speak for them all. His tone contained a combination of wonder and doubt.

Now that the Counselor had the children's attention, she explained what she wanted.

"We need your help," she said. "We would like you to tell us everything you can about Anchai. Do you think you could describe it to us?"

"Why?" asked a young voice curiously.

"We would like to take you home, but we don't know where that home is. We are hoping that if you tell us about it we will be able to find out where it is."

"Really?"

"Really." Deanna smiled as she sensed hopeful excitement fill the room. "Will you help us?"

"Oh, yes!" chorused the children eagerly.

Deanna split the children into three groups, one for each of the Starfleet officers.

Troi, Wesley and Data then sat down with their charges and began to extract information from them, carefully recording all the details.

Kitia found herself sitting next to Data and she stared at him in wonder. Finally, at a lull in the conversation, Data responded to the child's intense gaze by saying, "Is there a problem?"

"Pardon?" she asked, puzzled.

"You were staring at me. I wondered if, perhaps, there was a problem."

"Uh. No, sir. I... May I touch you?"

"If you wish."

Kitia tentatively reached out and touched the android's face. Data, mindful of the Counselor's evasion earlier, if not the reason for it, refrained from offering any explanations.

The child withdrew her hand and said, "Counselor Troi said you pulled me out of the rubble."

Data inclined his head.

"Thank you."

"You are welcome."

Data, somewhat bemused, noted that

this recognition seemed to give Kitia a new kind of elevated status amongst his group. He suspected that he had rescued some of the others too, but with their faces clean, fresh hair cuts and new clothes, the android had difficulty recognising them for certain.

They resumed their discussion of Anchai.

Wesley Crusher was not much older than the oldest child in his group, but he was uncomfortably aware of the awe the Anchaiki felt towards him. They watched him intently as he listened to them, and they recognised him as an authority figure. This realisation both flattered and unnerved the young ensign.

Just now Roja and Kormi were engaged in a heated debate about the precise colour of limp tree blossom.

"It's blue! Like Counselor Troi's dress is blue!" Kormi insisted.

"That's not blue," said Roja in disgust. "That's turquoise!"

Wesley intervened. "Never mind what it's called, just now. Is the blossom the same shade as the Counselor's dress?"

"No."

"Yes."

The children spoke together.

Crusher closed his eyes for a moment, then said, "Is it possible that different limp trees have different coloured flowers?"

The two children stared at him, as if the idea had never entered their heads before, and perhaps it hadn't. Another

child, a skinny red-headed girl, said, "I think so. When I was little, I was taken to visit Grandma in Joychi, the village in the next valley, and I'm sure I remember the blossoms being a different colour along the mountain roads."

Mountains, thought Wesley. Topography. Something easily detectable from space. Get them to talk about mountains.

Troi, meanwhile, was hearing about the coastal village of Broycha. By the sounds of things, little Enja was the only child in her group who had lived by the sea, and the other children listened excitedly as she spoke of the cliffs, the sand, and the water. *Their unfamiliarity with coastal lands might, Troi thought, indicate that Anchai had very little surface water.* However, that didn't seem to tie in with the descriptions the children had given her of Anchai's climate. Perhaps later, when the Starfleet officers collated their findings, she would find out more.

Troi realised with a start that they had been at this for two and a half hours already and they were only just scratching the surface of the detail needed. However, the children still had to be given time to rest and eat.

The Starfleet officers gathered up their charges, and returned them to the shuttlebay, promising to seek them out later that afternoon. Then Troi, Wesley and Data decided to take a short break themselves.

Data did not require food as did Troi and Wesley, so he decided to spend his break with Geordi La Forge. Data found the Engineer hunched over a computer schematic, rapidly tapping in a series of commands. Data recognised that Geordi

was busy, and was about to leave when the Human turned towards him, grinned broadly, and said, "Hi, Data. How're you doin'?"

"Hello, Geordi. I am doing fine."

If anything, Geordi's smile broadened at Data's attempt to use the phrase. Even though the words themselves were fine, Data, as usual, had managed to make them sound stiff and unwieldy.

"You're just the person I wanted to see!" said Geordi, enthusiastically.

"Do you require my assistance?"

"No. No, nothing like that. Listen, Data. Do you remember that conversation we had about parties?"

"Of course, Geordi. I remember everything."

Geordi mimed a touch gesture, which caused Data to furrow his brow when he failed to fathom its precise meaning. He did not have the opportunity to ask Geordi about it, however, as the Engineer was already speaking again. "Well, I thought about it and... Tasha called it your birth, so I was thinking we could take your discovery by the Tripoli as your birthday. What do you think?"

Data, somewhat obtusely Geordi thought, replied with a question. "What purpose would this serve?"

"You wanted to be able to experience birthdays from a Human perspective. This way, you could. Well, almost."

Data seemed to give Geordi's comments serious thought, then he said, "I do not believe celebrating the anniversary of my coming to consciousness would be analogous to the celebration of a human birthday."

"Why not?"

"There have been periods during my life when I have been deactivated, principally in the first few months after my discovery when Starfleet personnel and scientists from the Daystrom Institute examined me. How would these periods be accounted for?"

"Why do you need to account for them?" Geordi asked, wondering about the duration of these periods of down time. If they had been extensive, that might explain why Data initially had been reluctant to share the secret of his off-switch with his fellow Enterprise officers.

In response to Geordi's question, Data turned his yellow eyes away from Geordi's face and said, "If questions exist as to my status as a living being when I am fully conscious, how much more forceful are these questions when I am not functioning? Such periods are more analogous to death than they are to sleep, Geordi. I cannot count them as part of my life-span."

"Data..." Geordi shook his head, not sure what to say. He had had no idea that Data perceived things in quite that way. "So, you think we shouldn't do anything about your birthday?"

"I do not believe it to be applicable," said Data.

That didn't answer Geordi's question, but the Engineer decided to let the matter drop for the moment. Instead he said, "Hey, Data. Seeing as you're here, could you give me a hand with this?"

"Certainly, Geordi."

Soon the two friends were engrossed in their work.

"You wanted to see me, Captain?"

Jean-Luc Picard turned away from his contemplation of the stars and said, "Indeed, Number One. Take a seat."

When Riker had settled himself, Picard said, "We have something of a dilemma, Commander. Using the ship's sensors, Lt Worf has managed to identify an additional sixty-five children equipped with transponders on the planet. The question is, what are we going to do about them?"

"Sir?"

"Well, we can't bring them here without good cause. They survived the quake unharmed, and until we have absolute proof that our suspicions with regard to the origins of these children are accurate, we have no grounds for removing them from Exa III."

"I thought that Deanna and Data were working on establishing where their homeworld is."

"They are. Unfortunately it is taking rather longer than anticipated to collect and collate the information."

"Ah."

"Ah, indeed, Number One. And there's something else."

Riker raised his eyebrows questioningly.

"What are we going to do with the children if we *do* decide to remove them from Exa III?"

"I thought the idea was to take them home."

"So did I, Number One. But things aren't that simple. From what Counselor

Troi and Mr Data have reported, I gather that the world these children come from is undeveloped technologically."

"The Prime Directive applies?"

"Precisely, Number One. Returning the children, even if we could keep ourselves hidden, would still be in violation of the Directive. Think of the cultural contamination they would cause. Some of these children have been on Exa for several years. No matter that they have been marginalised from the Exan population, they have still been affected by that experience. Not to mention what they might pick up from their time with us."

"It sounds like it's a bit of a mess, sir."

"And you're a master of understatement." Picard wiped a hand across his head and face, a gesture borne of frustration. "It always comes down to the same thing. We need more information."

The two Starfleet officers lapsed into a thoughtful silence, then Picard said, "How would you feel about a spot of breaking and entering, Will?"

Riker turned startled eyes on his commanding officer. "Captain?"

"I just wondered if a little judicious snooping mightn't be in order."

"And where would we do this 'snooping'?"

"Well, the Mayor's office might be a good place to start."

The younger man scratched his beard thoughtfully, then said, "Well, all right. I guess it's worth a shot."

CHAPTER NINE

Four columns of light coalesced in the corridor outside Constatyn's office. Worf and Data immediately unsheathed their tricorders and scanned the area. Riker, after receiving silent confirmation that no-one else was near, tapped his communicator and said, "Riker to Enterprise. We're in."

"Acknowledged," replied Picard's disembodied voice. "Good luck."

Riker turned to face the others. "Well?" he queried.

"This place is definitely wired. Infra-red beams across the corridor. We're damned lucky that we didn't materialise in the middle of one!" said La Forge. "There's one in front of the Mayor's door, too." He gestured towards the beam of light that only he could see.

"We should be able to avoid it, if we're careful."

Riker addressed his next question to Worf. "Any other little treats we should know about?"

The Klingon grunted slightly, then he said, "There are contact points around the door-frame, but it should be possible to prevent the alarm from going off by jamming the transmission signal."

"Good." Riker watched as Worf tapped commands into his tricorder's keypad.

Finally the Klingon said, "We may proceed."

Geordi produced a small engineering tool and, with commendable skill, picked the door's lock.

The four Starfleet officers entered the office and La Forge quietly shut the door

behind them. Riker looked around and muttered, "Would have been simpler just to beam us straight in here," under his breath.

Data's acute hearing picked up the comment and he opened his mouth. Riker waved a 'not now' gesture at the android. He did not need reminding of the reasons for beaming into the corridor. The first (and most important) reason was quite simply one of practicality; the amount of free space in the corridor compared to inside the office made the transport much easier. The second reason was that, while the Enterprise's sensors knew how many people were in the building, they could not always accurately determine which floors were occupied. If anyone chanced to be on this floor when the Starfleet officers materialised, it would be easier to explain their presence outside, rather than inside, the Mayor's private chambers.

Now that they *were* inside, they simply had to hope that no-one caught them where they so obviously had no right to be. Alert to potential dangers, the four men set about their allocated tasks quickly.

La Forge and Data headed over to the computer terminal (which the Engineer described as being 'quaintly archaic') and proceeded to establish a link between the Enterprise and the planet. Access to the records which had been officially denied to them could be achieved safely and discreetly from orbit later, at their leisure.

Once Data would have felt uncomfortable about helping out with such endeavours. However, over the years the android had managed to modify his behaviour patterns enough to allow him to proceed efficiently with his current task. A small section of his mind noted the change, and took satisfaction in his having mastered another aspect of

Human behaviour, albeit a dubious one. Still, Data was conscious of the fact that the questionable ethics of what they were doing bothered him. He resolved to discuss the conflicting impulses he was experiencing with Geordi at a more appropriate time.

Worf and Riker quickly and methodically worked their way through the Mayor's cupboards and drawers, wishing that they knew exactly what it was they were looking for.

The effectiveness of their search was hampered by their poor understanding of the language; the universal translator could make sense of speech, but text remained so much indecipherable scrawl. Only Data could read it with ease.

"Commander!" Worf said suddenly. "Look at this." He held out a small rectangular block which consisted of a viewscreen, a track-ball, and a switch. The Klingon turned the device on and watched as a street map appeared. Scanning through the images, Worf and Riker saw small dots moving.

"A tracking device," observed Riker.

Worf nodded.

"Bring it. We'll check those dots against ship's sensors. confirm it is the kids that thing's picking up."

Worf grunted assent. They returned to their search.

The Enterprise's First Officer rifled through the drawers of Constatyn's desk. There were sundry bits of stationery, pens, pencils, odd coins... and a tiny black book that looked out of place. Riker picked it up and flicked through the pages. His brow creased as he looked at columns of words and numbers. "Data?"

"Sir?" The android walked over to join him.

"What do you make of this?"

"It appears to be a list of purchasers for something that is described only as 'games equipment'." There was a pause. "It appears to be a very expensive item."

"Could it be that?" Riker gestured to the object that Worf was still holding.

"Unknown, sir. Perhaps."

Riker nodded, and took a firm grip on the book, then said, "Come on. Let's get out of here. We've got what we came for."

Sometimes Data seems almost... Human, Riker thought. *Now is definitely not one of those times, though.* The Human found himself smiling slightly as he compared the hyper-efficient information gathering system sitting at Science One with his friend who played poker on Tuesday nights. Seated at a card table, absorbed in his attempts to penetrate the intricacies of the game, Data often seemed unsure of himself. It was when he struggled to assess whether or not his companions were bluffing that the android seemed most Human.

Just now, though, Data sat in front of the science console and absorbed information as it scrolled up a small computer screen faster than Human eyes could follow. Except for his tiny eye movements Data was completely immobile, and his expression was one of rapt attention. The First Officer watched from a discreet distance and found himself forcibly reminded of Data's mechanical nature.

"Commander." Data's calm voice called Riker out of his reverie. "I believe

that I have found something."

"What is it, Data?"

"I have been examining the logs of Exa's merchant ships. On seven occasions within the last three months ships have made calls at a planet in a nearby star system. However, it is not listed on any of Exa's established trading routes, and no records exist of purchases or sales having been made there."

"So, you think that this planet is the Anchai homeworld, Data?"

"It seems probable, Commander. Correlating this material with information obtained from the Anchaiki children and that contained in Federation records should confirm whether or not this hypothesis is valid."

"Good. Do it, Data."

"Aye, sir." Data turned back to his computers.

The door chime sounded, and Deanna Troi called, "Come in," as she stood to meet her guest. She smiled slightly as her visitor entered her office. "Secretary Loris. This is unexpected."

Loris waved the pleasantries aside and said, "I want to know what's going on."

"Secretary?"

"I came up to see some of the wounded. They've been asking me questions which, quite frankly, I don't want to answer. Which I *can't* answer! So, please, tell me what's going on!"

Troi nodded slightly. She gently guided Loris into the corridor, saying as she did so, "I think we'd better go to see

the Captain."

Five minutes later Loris found himself facing Jean-Luc Picard. Fifteen minutes later he found himself fervently wishing that he was somewhere - anywhere - else as he was confronted by the realities of life on Exa III.

"You have *proof* of this, Captain? Proof that the Exan government, and most particularly the Mayor, has been systematically kidnapping extraterrestrial children and sending them into the Anchai Game circuit?"

"We do."

"This is... I'd hoped that I was wrong..." The little man's face contorted with anguish. Picard watched unsympathetically, thinking that the Secretary's wilful ignorance had been as wicked in its own way as the Mayor's active participation. He'd known for years that something was going on, but he had been too scared or self-centred to do anything about it.

"What are you going to do?"

"We haven't quite decided yet. From your point of view, though, I doubt that it really matters. We haven't told the Exans what's going on - it's not our place to do so - but they've got eyes and ears. Perhaps they still don't quite understand, but some of them must have a pretty good idea of what's been happening by now. The truth *will* get out eventually, with or without our help."

Loris nodded miserably, and twined his fingers together in a complicated series of nervous gestures. Finally he said, "I must go. I need to think."

the government buildings. He walked a few paces towards the front door, stopped, and stared up at the huge edifice. Ever since he had been a small boy, this building had represented success and power; it was a concrete reminder of the things that he'd set out to achieve, a focus for his ambition. All the way through school and college, the Exan had kept his eyes tightly centred on a career in government; money, success and security. *All in all*, he now thought, *I have achieved practically everything that I set out to. And yet...*

His mind was in turmoil as he thought of the Enterprise, the children, and secrets that were surfacing after so many years. He sighed as he wondered, *Does this really matter so much? Isn't this just one more charge against my honesty account? Just one more ideal compromised?* He shook his head slightly, saddened and confused.

Loris turned his back on the building and walked away, not caring what direction he went in. He considered his life and his career. He'd paid a high price for making a reality out of his dreams. Most of the time he was able to dismiss such notions from his mind.

Today, though, thoughts about everything he'd lost - given up willingly - rose to haunt him. He had abandoned his family and friends as he advanced up the promotion ladder. He'd befriended more shady businessmen that he could remember, massaged the truth, and brown-nosed in all the right places. He wondered whether he had any moral principles left. Then he realised that he must have some vestiges of a conscience. Otherwise he would not have called for help. Nor would he have spoken about the Game.

These uncomfortable thoughts made him remember Cousin Montu, who had been the first to invite him to play. When

Secretary Loris materialised outside

Loris had not been able to bring himself to take part, Montu had been furious, just as Constatyn was furious. Both men had threatened to destroy Loris's career if the younger man ever breathed a word about it to an outsider. Loris did not doubt that either man could, or would, make good on their threats. After all, they knew all the most powerful individuals on the planet. Of course they did. Every one of them played the Game.

Yes, Loris thought. I have done very well for myself. Better than a boy from the back streets could have realistically hoped. But, somewhere along the way, I've sold my soul, too.

What am I going to do?

Lost in his dismal thoughts, Loris paid no attention to the path his feet took. He drew to a halt only when he was physically prevented from going any further by the brown seething mass that was the city's river.

What kind of a mental trick was this?

For the first time in over an hour he found himself paying attention to his surroundings, and he realised that he was once more in the neighbourhood where he'd grown up.

The earthquake had completely demolished several buildings and had damaged many more; but Loris could see that things had changed even before the recent earth tremors.

When he'd been a child the buildings had been poor, but they'd never been neglected by their occupiers, who had taken a pride in the meagre homes. Now peeling paint and crumbling brickwork told the secretary that the people he remembered had left years before. The realisation saddened him.

How could this have happened? How could

I not have known? Where did all the people go?

The hair on the back of Loris's neck twitched, and he realised that he was being watched. He turned slowly and saw startling blue eyes set in a grimy face staring nervously back at him. Obviously he had strayed too close to a den.

"Don't be afraid. I won't hurt you." It was a stupid thing to say. The child couldn't understand the words and, in any case, Loris's failure to do anything had surely hurt this boy... and would continue to do so.

The child's wary expression didn't change. Loris took a step towards him, but this was a mistake because it frightened him. Loris watched, startled, as the youngster turned tail and sprinted, gazelle-like, across the rubble-strewn ground.

Loris frowned. Other than the children on the Enterprise, he had never knowingly seen one of the Anchaiki so close up before. The memory of the child's timidity and distrust burned into his consciousness, and Loris suddenly knew that he had to do something.

His new-found resolve brought with it a profound sense of peace and relief. He smiled, and set off back towards the Central District. His walk was directed now, and purposeful, and determination filled his mind.

CHAPTER TEN

Lt Commander Data stood next to the computer screen in the conference lounge and illustrated his presentation with images of the world he had positively identified as Anchai. Even if nothing could be ascertained from the android's expression, one look at his colleagues'

faces showed that this was not necessarily good news.

"Although no detailed survey has been carried out on Anchai, several Federation probes have sent information which indicates that the planet is, indeed, a Prime Directive world."

Riker seemed to speak for them all as he said, "Oh great! Just great!"

"So what do we do now?" asked Beverly Crusher.

"I don't see that there is a lot that we can do," said Captain Picard, suppressing a sigh. "We obviously can't take them back home."

"We cannot leave them here, either." Deanna Troi turned her black eyes on the Captain. "To do so now, after we've offered them some hope, would be worse than if we had done nothing at all."

"What would you have me do, Counselor?" This time Picard did give in to his impulse. The resulting sigh was long and gusty.

"At the very least we must remove them from Exa III."

"And do what with them? If they are out of place on Exa, imagine how much more out of place they would be in the Federation."

"It is true that they are from a relatively undeveloped society, Captain. However, they are young and adaptable. I do not doubt that they could adjust to life in the twenty-fourth century. Given time."

"Would they want that, Deanna?" Crusher leaned across the table to add extra force to her question. "They've spoken about wanting to go home. But

none of them has expressed any desire to stay with us."

"That is true. But if the choice is staying with us or going back to Exa, which would you choose?"

"Good point." Crusher leaned back again.

"Captain."

"Yes, Number One."

"Do we have any jurisdiction here? Surely what to do with the Anchaiki is a domestic matter."

"Perhaps. I have to admit, though, that I would be loath to do nothing."

"It is not only the children who are aboard the Enterprise. There are those other sixty-five children in Central City as well."

Worf spoke up. "Of course, there is nothing to stop us simply beaming them aboard."

"That's kidnapping, Lieutenant. These children have been forcibly abducted once already. I'm not sure how they would react to being kidnapped a second time. Counselor?"

"I think an alternative solution should be found, Captain. Bringing the extra children aboard will be traumatic for them, however we do it. We should try to make any such transition as easy as possible for them. I think that we need to gain their trust; it should be their decision to come with us."

"Are they old enough to make that kind of decision?"

"Given the kind of lives they've been forced to live, I'd say that they'd have to

be."

"So. We're agreed that we should bring the children aboard."

Heads nodded.

"I can't see the Mayor being too happy with the idea."

"Neither can I, Number One. However, we'll cross that bridge as necessary. All we have to do now is decide what we're going to do with the Anchaiki once they are here."

"Captain."

Picard put down his mug of Earl Grey on the table in his living quarters and tapped his communicator. "What is it, Number One?"

"The Exan news channels have just announced that Secretary Loris is to make a planetary broadcast. I think you should hear it, sir."

"Oh?"

"He seems to have staged some kind of bloodless coup."

"What?!" Picard was already half way to the door when he said, "I'll be right there!"

Loris's face filled the Enterprise's view-screen as the Captain, along with the rest of the bridge crew, watched the broadcast run before him. The Secretary stood on the steps of the government buildings and looked directly into the camera. He spoke with more assurance than Picard would have believed him capable.

"Fellow Exans," he began, "I am speaking to you today as your new planetary leader." Loris paused as he raised his hand as though staving off his people's protests. "By now you will be aware of the coup that has taken place here in Central City. The decision to displace Mayor Constatyn is not one that I made lightly, I assure you.

"My assuming the role of head of state will be a short-term arrangement. I admit that I am, in many ways, as guilty of misconduct as Constatyn. However, I feel it is my duty to oversee the process of leading our planet towards fresh elections and a corruption-free government.

"It is only right that I explain to you my reasons for staging what will surely be seen by many of you as an unprovoked rebellion."

The Secretary proceeded to give a brief summary of the events of the past few days, leading up to the Enterprise's discovery of the Anchaiki and the Game. "Although the Starfleet crew has only just uncovered the Anchai Game, and the majority of you will not have heard of it, I have the unenviable task of having to inform you that many members of our government have been aware of its existence, and have been actively involved in playing it, for years. Although I never participated in it, I confess that I, too, was aware of its existence. I am guilty of that crime, and the crime of doing nothing about it.

"Until now.

"I wish to see the Game stopped immediately, once and for all. I wish to see the Anchaiki helped for once, and no longer abused. I hope that you, the people of Exa, will find it in yourselves to support me in these aims.

"Good night."

The Secretary stared silently into the camera for a few seconds after he finished speaking, then the channel closed.

The Captain and First Officer traded glances. Picard finally said, "Number One, I think our job may just have got easier."

The summons to yet another briefing came several hours later, just as Geordi sat down with a steaming mug of coffee. "Damn," he muttered to himself as he put the drink down on one side, stood up, and exited his quarters.

He'd just stepped into the turbolift when a voice called out, "Wait up, Geordi!"

La Forge held the lift's doors open until William Riker was safely inside. "Bridge," the First Officer said, clearly heading for the same meeting as the Engineer.

As the lift began its sideways movement Riker turned to La Forge. "Had any more thoughts about Data's party?"

"Yes... and no."

"You'll have to explain that one."

La Forge sighed. "I talked to Data again. He didn't seem to think that having a birthday celebration would be - I think the word he used was 'applicable.'"

"So are you saying that we shouldn't do anything, after all?"

"No," said La Forge, but there was doubt in his voice. "Data didn't say that he didn't *want* to do anything... Rather he

seemed to imply that the idea of his having a birthday was inappropriate."

The lift shifted smoothly as it began its vertical ascent towards the bridge and Riker chuckled, saying, "Yeah. But we knew that anyway. He's an android, for heaven's sake!"

"You don't think it matters?"

"No." Riker paused then continued. "If it makes you feel better, think about it this way. I read somewhere about the British monarchy back in the twentieth century. Some monarchs celebrated two birthdays a year. They had their real ones, and then official ones, too."

"Why?"

Riker shrugged. "I'm not sure. As far as I could tell, the only reason for having the official birthdays was so that people could celebrate in the summer when the weather was good."

La Forge frowned. "What's your point?"

"Why should birthdays have anything to do with an actual date of birth?"

"And what's good enough for the King of England is good enough for the Enterprise's Second Officer?"

"Right." The turbolift drew to a halt at that moment, and the doors opened onto the bridge. Riker walked out ahead of La Forge, saying as he did so, "When are you going to fix a date?"

La Forge grinned as he thought, *What the hell?* Out loud he said, "Soon, sir. Very soon."

Together they headed for the conference room.

Loris, seated on the Captain's left, was speaking as Riker and La Forge entered the room, the last people to arrive. They sat down as quietly as they could.

"I have to say," Picard commented, looking at the Exan, "that we were rather taken by surprise by your broadcast."

"Yes. Well." Loris looked uncomfortable, his unwillingness to discuss his actions more than obvious in his expression and movements. The Captain glanced across at the Counselor who shook her head fractionally: questions about the mechanics of the coup were to be avoided, at least for the time being.

"What sort of response have you had to the announcement?" asked Picard.

"Good. Very good. It's amazing. Hundreds of people have come forward with offers of aid. People want to help the children. Adopt them, even." Loris shook his head in disbelief. "The problem is, though, I'm still not sure what's best for them."

"We wanted to take them home," Picard said regretfully. "Unfortunately our own laws would seem to rule that out as an option. That leaves us with two choices, as far as I can see. One: leave them with you; or two: take them with us. I have to confess, we *had* decided that removing the Anchaiki from Exa III was the preferred option, but that was before the recent - hm - developments. In any case, either option is going to be problematic."

"I can see that." Loris looked around the table at the serious faces of the Starfleet personnel. "But whatever we do decide, Captain, I want you to know I will help in anyway I can."

"Thank you."

"Perhaps," Counselor Troi said, "we might start to track down the remaining children? We will have to do that whatever happens to them, and it will take some time."

"Secretary... I mean *Mayor* Loris?" Picard queried, checking for the visitor's opinion.

"Fine by me. I told you, I want to help. I certainly won't stand in your way. Not any more."

"Fine. Counselor, Number One. See to it, will you?"

"Aye, sir," replied Riker.

Troi spoke up. "If I might suggest, Captain?"

"Carry on."

"I'd like to ask Mitcheka Korl to help us. And, perhaps, we might get one or two of the older children to help, too. I think it would be easier to get the children's trust with their assistance."

"Good idea."

Troi and Riker stood up to leave, soon to be followed by everyone else apart from Picard and Loris. Picard cleared his throat as he decided how best to tackle a rather difficult matter. Finally he said, "What are you going to do about the players?"

"Captain?"

"You've pledged to clean up your government. Presumably that means finding out who has been involved with the Game."

"Well... yes. But there's a problem."

"Oh?"

"I don't know exactly who played, or even who knew about it. And it doesn't seem right to pursue only some of the players. The alternative is a witch-hunt, and quite frankly I think that'll do as much harm as good."

"If it helps, we have the information you lack."

"How?" asked Loris, astonished.

"This is rather... embarrassing."

"Go on."

"Some of my people broke into the Mayor's office."

"What?! How dared you?"

"I'm sorry. I realise that we had no right to do it, but we had to know where the Anchaiki came from."

Loris breathed deeply. His first instinct was to condemn Picard for his people's misconduct. However, a little snooping paled into insignificance against Loris's own actions. After all, Constatyn would never have agreed to retire from public life - due to ill-health - were it not for Loris's assurances that certain documents detailing years' worth of corruption and back-handers had found their way into the hands of several lawyers. If anything were to happen to Loris, his political reforms, or to the Anchaiki, Constatyn knew that these papers would inevitably fall into the clutches of several hungry journalists, not to mention the public prosecutor and the police. His motives were good, but what Loris had done to safeguard the future of the Anchaiki was nothing short of blackmail.

Perhaps it was best to ignore the Starfleet officers' misdemeanours. "What did you find?"

"A list of people who'd bought tracking devices. Names, addresses, dates and amounts."

"I see." Loris didn't sound overjoyed at the revelation.

"Would the information help?"

"I... I'm not sure. Exposing all the players..." He shook his head. "I have to think about it."

"What is there to think about?"

"Even without definite names, I can tell you that key politicians, captains of industry, all sorts of influential Exans will be on your list. What'll it do to the economy if I expose all of them? I might want to, but perhaps it would be better not to do so. In a way, it was a relief not knowing. Now that I know you have the information that I lack, I am forced to make an unenviable decision."

"Hmm. A problem."

"Yes. But equally, I'm scared that if I do nothing, they might start again. Maybe not this year. Or next. But some time. It could happen."

Picard nodded. "I understand your dilemma. But remember, the information is here, should you decide that you want it."

"Thank you. I'll let you know."

"Are you all right?"

Kitia turned to face the voice's owner.

"You do not appear to be enjoying yourself," Data observed. "Why do you spend all your time just sitting on your bed? There are many things on the

Enterprise to occupy you."

"I don't like machines." The last word was said in Federation English, Anchai having no equivalent.

Data looked a little bemused at the apparent non sequitur and said, "Do you wish me to leave?"

"You've only just arrived. Why should I want you to go?"

Data tilted his head slightly to one side; he thought back to the sessions in the classroom and realised that Kitia had no idea as to his true origins. "You wish me to stay?"

"Yes."

"Very well." Data sat down next to the young girl. He looked at her speculatively, then turned his gaze onto the rest of the room. There were still some Exans in the ward, but the majority of the remaining patients were Anchaiki children. Some were talking, others playing; but a substantial number, like Kitia, were perched on their beds, looking lost.

Data turned his gaze back to Kitia, thought about her earlier comment, and asked, "If you do not like machines, how have you filled your time?"

Kitia shrugged and said nothing.

"Why do you not like machines?"

Again the girl shrugged, but she did at least try to answer the question. "They... frighten me. And they are everywhere here, so I can't do anything because everything needs machines."

"Do all the Anchaiki feel that way?" Data queried.

"Most do. Some don't."

"What would you like to do?"

"Play." Kitia proceeded to describe a simple set of rules and before long Data found himself drawn into a childish word game. However, he stored the conversation and its implications away, resolving to discuss them with Counselor Troi at the first available opportunity.

In Transporter Room Three, Chief O'Brien watched, amused, as Counselor Troi comforted the two children who stood on the transporter pads. He took the technology so much for granted that he found the Anchaiki's timidity oddly refreshing and endearing.

"Now," Troi said, "remember what I told you. There is absolutely no reason to be afraid. All you will feel is a slight tingling sensation, and you'll be on the planet."

The two children exchanged nervous glances. Even though they had been shown the view of Exa from the Enterprise, they found the idea of the planet being somehow separate from the ship difficult to grasp.

"We'll be with you. And, if it makes you feel better, remember that you've both used the transporter before, even if you were unconscious at the time."

Mitcheka Korl gently placed her wizened hands on the boys' shoulders and said, "I don't know if it'll help... but I'm scared, too."

J'Benk and Sammi turned wide eyes on her. "Really?" asked one.

"Really. But I'm sure that everything'll be all right."

"All right," the children echoed softly, and they relaxed sufficiently to stand on the pads without further encouragement from any of the adults.

Troi smiled, and traded looks with Riker. Privately she thought, *I was right to ask Mitcheka to help us. Just look how easily she gained these kids' confidence!*

"Energise," ordered Riker.

Before the children had time to reconsider their decision to go back to Central City, they found themselves standing on the banks of the river.

"That was... remarkable," said Mitcheka in a rather stunned tone, and she looked down towards her toes as if to check that they were still exactly where she had last seen them.

After a few moments, Mitcheka seemed to gather her wits together, and she turned her attention to her surroundings. They had arrived a mere three blocks from her home and from the market place where she had first met Kitia.

Riker and Troi acquiesced to her request to find out what had become of her house, and together the little group picked its way through the dust and debris of shattered buildings.

Finally they came to a halt and Mitcheka Korl looked at the shattered ruin that had been her home. She shook her head, realising that she had lost all of what little she'd had to lose.

Counselor Troi stood at her shoulder, silently offering support.

William Riker spoke into the air as he talked to Worf who was manning sensors far above them, on the Enterprise.

The deep voice of the Klingon security chief said, "I am picking up one of the children twenty feet away from you. The child appears to be in the alleyway."

"Thanks, Worf. We're on our way."

The small group walked in the direction Worf had indicated, making no attempt at stealth, sure that a more direct approach would seem less threatening.

As they walked into the alley a flurry of movement at the far end caught their attention. A small skinny child with long tangled brown hair was trying to scramble over a fence. Riker tentatively determined that it was female.

"Hey!" called out J'Benk. "Wait up! It's okay! They aren't gonna hurt you!"

The girl paused in her efforts to escape, stunned more by the language they were spoken in than by the words themselves. "'S all right." Sammi confirmed J'Benk's words then said, "They want to help. They're nice. They give us food an' all."

The stranger still had her hands tightly wrapped around the top of the fence, ready to flee at a moment's notice. However, the two boys' reassurances caused her to turn her head.

"Really?" she asked doubtfully.

"Really." Several voices, adults and children, mingled in together.

Deanna slowly walked forward. "Hello. My name is Deanna. What is yours?"

"Lyssa," the girl whispered.

"These are friends of mine," said Deanna, and she introduced the others.

Mitcheka moved forwards and stood next to the trembling child. "They really do want to help you. They want you to go with them."

"Where?" Lyssa relaxed her hold on the fence, and dropped to the ground. She looked up into Mitcheka's face.

"Away from here. Somewhere safer."

"Yeah! An' there's lots of us there, too. More'n I've ever seen before, 'cept for at Festival."

Lyssa blinked. *Lots of Anchaiki? And food?*

"It's different there. I mean, really different. Scary, too, sometimes. But everyone's *real* nice, and it's better than here." Sammi's final word was laden with hatred and contempt.

Lyssa looked at the others who all nodded agreement encouragingly. *Well*, she thought. *Things can't get any worse. There's no food since the quake and...* Tentatively, shyly, she held out her hand towards Mitcheka Korl. The old woman took it, then clasped the child to her breast in a heartfelt hug.

Riker smiled. *One down. Only sixty-four to go.*

It was hours later when Mitcheka Korl and Deanna Troi returned to the Enterprise.

As they stepped off the transporter platform Mitcheka turned to Troi and asked, "Counselor, what will happen to the children now?"

"I don't know. If only we could take them home..."

"Why can't you?"

"Our laws forbid it."

Mitcheka's brow creased into a frown. That was not the answer she had been expecting. "Pardon?" she asked, seeking clarification.

Deanna Troi turned solemn eyes on her companion and explained patiently, "We wanted to take them back to their families, but we discovered that their homeworld is covered by the Prime Directive."

"And what is this Prime Directive?"

"We are forbidden to do anything that might influence the natural development of the planet's people. Returning the children to Anchai would be extremely disruptive: they have seen technologies and worlds of which the rest of the population could not conceive. And so, unfortunately, our law forbids it."

"But," Mitcheka said, brow furrowed even deeper than before, "I still don't understand. After all, the Anchai came from Exa in the first place."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"I'm sorry. You'd found out about everything else. I thought you knew that, too." Mitcheka Korl shook her head slightly, taken aback by the stunned reaction her words had evoked.

Deanna Troi sighed softly and said, "No. We did not. We suspected that there had to be some sort of connection, but..." She paused, then tentatively continued. "Before, you said that you would think about telling us where the Anchaiki come from. Would you be prepared to do that now?"

Mitcheka Korl turned away from the Counselor. Deanna watched her as she clenched and unclenched her hands. Tension tightened her muscles noticeably as she seemed to wage some kind of internal battle. So desperate was she for a response that Troi had to force herself to be patient and silent while Korl sought her answers.

Finally the Exan turned back to face the Betazoid and said, "I think perhaps the time has come for me to stop hiding from the past. Yes. I will tell you."

"The Anchaiki," Mitcheka said to a packed conference lounge, "are originally from Exa. They were a cultural minority who eschewed technology. Over time, as Exa became more developed, the Anchaiki felt life to be increasingly intolerable. It wasn't just because of the technological changes, of course. There wouldn't have been a problem if they'd just been left alone. But there was the prejudice..."

"I didn't want to talk about it before. I couldn't bring myself to do so. You see, it's a taboo subject on Exa now, and even thinking about it brings back so many painful memories." Mitcheka took a deep breath.

Troi smiled encouragingly and said, "It's all right. Take your time." Other heads nodded supportive agreement.

"It was only about sixty years ago that they left. That's all. The Exan government offered to relocate the Anchaiki on one of the newly discovered worlds. At first the Anchaiki were reluctant to accept the offer; it meant leaving Exa, and it meant making use of - depending on - the very technology that they hated so much. Finally though, for various reasons, they decided to go.

"It meant severing all ties with Exa, something that came very unnaturally to everyone. They knew that there would be no help if anything went wrong. It meant..."

Korl's voice wavered, and tears pricked at her eyes. She swallowed and stared down at her hands for a few moments as she found the strength to continue with her story. Finally she looked up again and said, "It meant having to make hard decisions. I was sixteen at the time, and I'd met a boy. I was Anchaiki. He wasn't. I had to choose between him and my family.

"Of course, my parents were quite right. I was just a stupid, naive child, and things didn't work out between us. Then, for years I couldn't get a decent job. The only language I could speak properly was Anchai, and there was no-one around who'd admit to knowing it. I couldn't cope with any sort of equipment." She shook her head in a vain attempt to shake off all her regrets.

"The Exan government passed laws. They didn't want to be reminded of the Anchaiki. They purged the libraries, computer records, anything that might contain any reference to them. Can you imagine what it's like to lose contact with your own people and then to have to watch as all reminders of them are wiped out, too? The only thing I could do about it was to try and forget as well. I thought that would get rid of the pain, you see.

"I tried so hard to be the best Exan that I could..." Korl's words trailed into silence.

"What I don't understand," said William Riker during the resulting pause in the conversation, "is why the government felt it was necessary to destroy all the records."

Mitcheka glanced at Riker and tried to

explain. "Exan society requires conformity. Perhaps it's hard for you to understand that. I mean, even just looking around this table, I can see so much diversity." Her restless gaze slid over Data, Worf, Troi and La Forge before it settled back on Riker. "On Exa, conformity is all. Peer pressure... That's just how things work. The Anchai wouldn't conform, therefore they had to go."

It still didn't make much sense to him, but Riker nodded.

Picard, from the head of the table, said, "Please. Go on."

"People do forget amazingly quickly. Anyone below sixty years old would probably say they've never even heard of the Anchaiki. And I doubt that anyone older than that has clear memories after all this time. At least, that's what I thought, up until a few months ago.

"I began to notice the children. They'd turn up in the market, all scruffy and unkempt. They were stealing food. That's more or less unheard of on Exa. I didn't *know* where they'd come from, any more than anyone else seemed to. But... I don't know why, somehow I just guessed they were Anchaiki. Kitia was the first one I actually talked to, though, or tried to help.

"And, well, that's really everything."

"Thank you." Picard glanced around the table. "Comments, anyone?"

Deanna Troi said, "From what the children have told us, it would appear that they know nothing of their extraterrestrial origins. It would appear that the Anchaiki have been every bit as determined to forget about the Exans as the Exans have been to forget about them."

"That would appear to be correct," observed Data. "We have noticed that the universal translator is unable to translate words relating to anything more than the most basic technology. It seems probable that all such words have been eliminated from the language."

"Why would anyone be so determined to forget?" Incomprehension wrinkled Geordi La Forge's face.

"Bad memories." Mitcheka Korl shrugged the question away. "However, there must be Anchaiki who *do* remember. I'm not that old: I'm sure that there are people who made the journey still alive on Anchai. Surely, if the voyage is still within living memory, the children could be taken home without violating your law."

"You think that the children should be taken home?" Picard asked.

"Of course. Don't you?"

"I believe all those present would be inclined to agree with you. However, let me play devil's advocate for a moment. If the Anchaiki have forgotten their past, what right have we to remind them of it?"

"What right have we not to? Think of the children. Think of the parents of those children!" Dr Beverly Crusher's eyes caught those of Jean-Luc Picard. He nodded curtly. She had a point and, of all those present, she was surely the person most able to empathise with the plight of the parents. The bond that linked her to her son was strong: Picard knew that, were anything to happen to Wesley, Beverly would be devastated.

"My inclination is to agree that the children should be returned home." Relieved sighs greeted Picard's words. "However, I would be acting irresponsibly if I were to rush into this

without giving careful consideration to the ramifications of the decision. I'll have to give this matter careful thought; I'll let you know what I decide. But, for now, dismissed."

The Starfleet officers filed out of the room, but Korl hung back. Finally she summoned up enough courage to speak. "Captain..."

"Yes?"

"If you do decide to go... please... take me with you?"

Picard leaned back in his chair and eyed the old woman thoughtfully. "Why do you want to go?"

"I... want to go home."

"But you have never been there."

"No. That's true. But you Earth people, I've discovered, have a saying. Home is where the heart is. And my heart has been with the Anchaiki for more years than I care to remember. I want to go to Anchai, and... If you'll just think about it?"

Picard looked at her silently for a few moments. Then he said, "You will be more than welcome to accompany us, if we go. I'll let you know what I decide."

"Thank you."

In Ten Forward, Counselor Troi carefully slid her spoon into her dessert and watched intently as the chocolate ice-cream gathered in its concave surface. Her companion, William Riker, watched her with barely contained amusement. "Enjoying yourself, Deanna?" he asked.

"Yes. Now shut up." The glance the

Betazoid threw at her imzadi was full of irritated affection.

He stifled his laugh and merely said, "Good," as he raised his glass to his lips.

The intimate mood was immediately shattered by a calm voice saying, "Commander. Counselor. If I might have a word?"

Riker stifled a sigh and gestured to a chair. "Sure. Sit down. What is it, Data?"

"I am concerned about the children."

That statement got their attention. Troi turned her eyes away from the brown concoction in front of her and looked instead at the android. "Oh?" she said. "How so?"

"While you were on the planet I spent some time with the child known as Kitia."

"Yes?"

"She, along with a majority of the other children, appears to be reluctant to avail herself of the facilities aboard the Enterprise. She indicated that the machinery intimidated her."

"So how has she been keeping herself occupied?"

"I am not certain that she has been 'keeping herself occupied'." Data tilted his head to one side. "I could not see a way to remedy the situation, and thought perhaps you might have some ideas."

Troi shook her head slightly and said, "I don't know, Data. I'll try to think of something."

"Thank you, Counselor." Data rose and left.

Deanna glanced across and noticed

Will Riker's smirk. "What?" she asked with an exasperated smile.

"I have an idea. Let's see if we can't find Geordi."

From the other end of their communication's link, Loris smiled wryly at Picard. "Hello, Captain."

"Sec - Mayor."

"I can't get used to the new title, either. Oh, well. I don't suppose that it will be mine for very long. I wanted to speak to you about your... your generous offer."

"Indeed. Have you reached any decisions?"

"Yes, Captain. I think that I'd rather you kept the book. I just hope that's the right choice."

"So do I. But I understand your reasons. I have a decision to make, too. And I'd very much like to discuss it with you."

"Go on, Captain."

"I want to take the children home."

Geordi La Forge listened to Riker's proposal, a smile widening across his face. "I think that's an excellent idea, sir!"

Deanna nodded. It did have merit. "Now," she said, "if we can just get the children to help..."

Extract from the Captain's Log:

Mayor Loris is in accord with my decision to take the Anchaiki back to their homeworld. We both believe that their rightful place is with their parents.

I hope that this is the right thing to do. Although correct in the letter of the law, I cannot help but wonder if I am not about to violate the spirit of it. The Anchaiki have chosen to forget their past, although it appears unlikely that they will have completely succeeded. What right have we to open old wounds?

Extract from the Captain's Personal Log:

... What is it that they say about the devil and the deep blue sea?...

Mitcheka Korl stared out of the windows in Ten Forward. The planet was not visible from the bar just now, and in front of the ports there was nothing but open space and pin-pricks of star light. It seemed inconceivable that their destination was a lump of rock orbiting one of those specks. *Is this*, Mitcheka wondered, *how my parents felt all those years ago? Awed? And almost disbelieving?*

I hope I'm doing the right thing, she thought. *I have nothing here.*

That's true enough. And I've longed to be back with the Anchaiki for so long. But what if time has distorted my memories? Or if it has changed the Anchaiki? It's not too late to change my mind, to decide to stay here, after all.

Could I have tried harder to fit in on Exa? Could I have been happy there, if only I'd done things differently? I don't think so. But the fact remains that Exa is the only life that I truly

know now, and I'm going to turn my back on that world. If only I could be sure...

"It's beautiful, isn't it?"

Korl spun round, startled by the warm tones.

"Hello. I'm Guinan."

"Mitcheka Korl."

"I know. I have heard a lot about you."

"Oh?"

"Your work with the Anchaiki children on the planet was, I understand, invaluable."

"Thank you."

"They like you."

Mitcheka raised her eyebrows in silent interrogation.

"I have spoken to several of the children. They trust you. You inspire confidence in them."

"I wish that I could inspire confidence in myself." She chuckled humourlessly. "Oh, well. I was glad to help. I'm also very glad that the Captain has decided to take them home."

"And you."

"Yes... I'm just not sure what sort of a welcome to expect. What sort of world I'm headed for."

"You could always ask the children. Spend some more time with them. I'm sure that they would be happy to talk to you. Besides, I'm sure they'd appreciate some help."

"Help?"

Guinan smiled enigmatically and said, "You'll see."

Mitcheka Korl, curiosity aroused, said good bye, turned away from the port, and exited the lounge.

The holodeck's doors slid apart and Mitcheka Korl stepped into a huge barn. Sunlight shone through open windows and reflected on dust motes, creating insubstantial silver pillars that reached from floor to ceiling. Dozens of children were hanging decorations around the walls. Other people were brushing the floor.

Mitcheka stood on the threshold and gaped. This... this was in the starship! But it was definitely an Anchaiki barn! The memories came flooding back, sharp and precise. It felt like a homecoming, and it was such a relief to see her mental images given concrete form at last.

"Hello."

"Deanna! This is..." Words failed her.

"We are getting ready for a party."

"I can see that..."

From across the barn, Kitia's eyes alighted on the old woman and, much to the chagrin of the child holding the other end, Kitia dropped her end of a streamer and came bounding over.

"Hello! We're helping get ready for Data's birthday party. Isn't this great?"

"Great." Mitcheka frowned slightly. "But isn't Data the-"

"I'll explain later," said Deanna quietly. "Meanwhile, would you care to help?"

"Certainly."

With a laugh, Deanna thrust a broom into the older woman's hands.

Later that evening the Enterprise slid out of orbit and, slowly at first, the starship drew away from Exa III. Mitcheka Korl, Deanna Troi and several of the Anchaiki children stood on one of the rear observation decks and watched as the planet receded.

"Well, that's that, then. We're going home," said Mitcheka as the Enterprise finally jumped into warp. She smiled happily, finally certain that she'd made the correct choice; that she was right to leave the only real home she knew far, far behind her.

Kitia grasped Mitcheka Korl's hand in her own and echoed, "Home," in a dreamy voice.

Deanna looked at them and smiled.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"Come on, Data!" Kitia pulled at the android's sleeve. Geordi La Forge watched the impatient child with a broad grin on his face.

"Where are we going?" Data asked.

"You'll see!"

Data glanced across at La Forge, but no answers were forthcoming from that quarter either. It was obvious that if Data wanted to find out what was going on, he would have to acquiesce to the child's demands. Besides, his uniform would continue to suffer from the mauling it was receiving if he did not.

Kitia led Data and Geordi through the corridors of the Enterprise, almost dancing with barely contained glee. Finally they came to a halt outside one of the holodecks. It was not a destination that Data would have predicted, not after Kitia's earlier comments about the Enterprise's machinery. Apparently, however, she had mastered the worst of her fear, at least when other people were present.

Their destination did not seem to surprise La Forge; indeed, it was he who keyed in the command to open the door. When the computer invited them to, 'Enter when ready,' they crossed over the threshold and found themselves inside the Anchai barn.

"Happy birthday, Data!" The multitude of voices echoed in the large structure.

Data glanced around. The barn was filled with Anchaiki children, as well as with members of the Enterprise's more usual contingent. He blinked, opened his mouth slightly, and tilted his head to one side. Finally he said, "But it is not my birthday."

"It is now, buddy!"

"Geordi -"

The Engineer cut off the inevitable stream of questions by saying, "Just think about this as being any other holodeck role play."

"Hmm. I am uncertain how to adequately portray someone having a birthday."

"You'll do fine. You're not Sherlock Holmes, but you do a creditable impression of him."

"That is true."

More quietly Geordi said, "In any case, we didn't do it just for you."

"Geordi?"

"Well, we - that is Commander Riker and I - were going to organise you a party anyway, but when you told him that the children needed something to keep them occupied, Commander Riker saw this as a golden opportunity to do both things at the same time. The Anchaiki planned this. And decorated. We just helped them to get things organised. Now look at them: they're having a great time. Just wait until we get onto the games."

"Games?"

"Here, come on. Cut the cake." Troi presented Data with a knife. Data did as the Counselor suggested and eager children lined up as Data distributed slices of a very gungy looking gâteau.

It was only after the last child had been served that Riker asked, "What did you wish for?"

"Wish?" Data managed to arrange his features into an approximation of a frown. "I was unaware that I am supposed to make a wish. What should I wish for?"

"Well, you can wish for anything you like. Only, it's too late now."

"Why is it too late?"

"You've already cut the cake."

Data thought for a few moments, then finally he said, "Commander, perhaps if you could explain this gathering to me..."

Riker sighed, and thought, *Why me?* Then he spent the next half hour trying to satisfy the android's curiosity.

When Commander Riker stepped out onto the bridge, Captain Picard turned to watch him as he walked down the ramp, and said, "I trust the party is going well, Number One?"

"Yes, sir." The First Officer chuckled, then said, "When last seen, Data was playing something called Pickling Piles." At Picard's questioning look, he continued, "Don't ask me. I had no idea what was going on. All I can tell you is that it seemed to involve an incredible amount of shouting and running around." He shrugged. "Roja said that Data was very good at it."

Picard acknowledged Riker's explanation with a curt nod and thought, *Well, I had intended to put in a brief appearance, but that description does rather put me off. Children! Beverly says that you get to feel differently when you have your own... I'm not convinced.*

"How much longer now, Captain?"

"We should make orbit in a couple of hours. Then the hard part begins."

"Sir?"

"Well, we can hardly beam down unannounced, can we?"

"I suppose not."

"Besides..."

"Captain?"

Picard idly stroked his chin. "I am not entirely happy with the way things stand at present."

"Why not?"

"You are aware that Loris decided not to take the list of players, aren't you?"

Riker nodded.

"He also expressed concern that, if the opportunity presented itself, the players might start up the Game again, sometime in the future."

The First Officer raised his eyebrows.

"Well, it is a possibility. Although we've removed the children, all the other infrastructure remains in place. Rules, tracking devices... And the Federation certainly can't keep an eye on Exa permanently, can it?"

"No. But what would you suggest?"

"What I would like to suggest is that the Anchaiki take a sub-space radio receiver. In case of emergencies. However, that would seem to breach all their cultural norms. What right have we to impose our wishes on them?"

"You could argue," Riker responded thoughtfully, "that since we are going to cause so much upheaval anyway, a little extra will be neither here nor there. What additional harm could a radio possibly cause?"

"True. We could make that argument. But I'm not certain that we should. Our unexplained arrival will inevitably be unsettling. If we try to convince them to take our technology as well, aren't they going to find that intimidating?"

"Are you concerned about what their reaction to the suggestion would be, given their dislike of machinery? Or are you concerned with the ethics of giving them the technology in the first place?"

Picard thought for a moment. "Good question, Number One. I am concerned about both things, of course. But, I suppose, I am most concerned about making sure that they accept the

technology willingly, and without feeling coerced by us."

"Would you feel happier if the suggestion that we leave a radio came from them?"

"With the level of technological knowledge these people have, that is hardly likely, Number One."

"Mitcheka Korl could present our case..."

Picard turned piercing eyes in Riker's direction. His immediate reaction was to dismiss the idea. But, when he thought about it, he realised that Mitcheka was culturally much closer to these people than he was, and he realised that, perhaps, they might listen to her as an equal. Perhaps it would be worth a try.

"Hello, Data. Many happy returns of the day," said Keiko Ishikawa.

"Thank you, Keiko."

The Japanese woman smiled and said, "I have to admit, I didn't realise that you actually celebrated your birthday."

"This is the first time that I have done so. However, it is not, in fact, my birthday. Nor was this my idea."

"Oh?"

Data started to explain. He still was not too convinced about the comparison Riker had made to the King of England...

It soon became clear that Keiko's attention was not focused on the conversation, however. Her eyes kept shifting away from Data's face to a corner of the barn where Geordi La Forge and Miles O'Brien were deep in conversation.

"Keiko? What is wrong?" Data asked, when he noticed his companion's distraction.

"What? Oh, nothing. Look, Data - could you do me a favour and introduce me to Chief O'Brien? He's over there."

Data looked at her intently and asked, "If you already know who he is, why do you need me to introduce you?"

"I... just do..."

Data did not pretend to understand. Perhaps it was another of those strange birthday rituals: he resolved to ask Geordi about it.

Together Keiko and Data made their way over to the Engineer and the Transporter Chief. Data made the appropriate introductions and then he watched, fascinated, as Keiko gently steered O'Brien away from the group.

Data opened his mouth with what was definitely going to be a question on his lips.

However, at that precise moment, his communicator chirruped. Data filed the question away for some future occasion and tapped the little emblem. "Data here."

"Mr Data, I'm sorry to drag you away from your party, but could you please come to the bridge?"

"Aye, Captain. I am on my way."

The Enterprise was gliding through the Anchai star system as Data arrived to take up his station. He immediately set about pointing the Enterprise's sensors at the planet while he listened to the buzz of conversation that floated around the bridge.

"It's beautiful," said Deanna Troi as the starship finally slid into orbit around one of the planets.

"It is, isn't it," Picard agreed. Then, turning towards ops, he asked, "Have you found anything, Data?"

The android did not look up as he said, "I am detecting a range of small settlements and farms. There would appear to be no evidence of industry, or of large scale power sources."

"It's as we expected, then?"

"Yes, sir."

"Counselor, can you get Mitcheka Kori up here, please?"

"Yes, Captain." She made her way towards the nearest turbolift, and disappeared.

"Data, from the information that the children gave you, can you tell which settlements they came from?"

Data swivelled round in his seat before replying. "In the majority of cases, I believe so," he said. "However, certain of the children - principally the younger ones - failed to give us enough details for that to be possible. For example -"

Picard cut him off with a brief gesture that Data had learned long ago to recognise as meaning, 'Please, spare me the details'.

Counselor Troi reappeared soon afterwards, closely followed by Mitcheka Kori. The older woman paused at the top of the ramp, astonished by the sight on the screen before her.

Then, slowly, she made her way down into the command well. It was only the second planet that she had ever seen from

space, and she stared at it as though in a trance. Finally she said, "Is that... is that Anchai?"

"It is."

"Oh." The single syllable conveyed wonder, gratitude and joy in about equal measures.

After a moment's respectful pause Picard interrupted the mood by saying, "Ms Korl, I'd like to have a word with you before we start returning the children to the planet."

"Certainly, Captain."

"Come on through to my ready room. We should be more comfortable in there."

Korl followed Picard into his private sanctum, though she looked back at the screen several times as she did so. Once inside, she sat down opposite him. The Captain cleared his throat, then began to outline his concerns. "I would like to think that bringing the children home means that they'll be safe once again, but unfortunately I cannot guarantee that to be the case." He paused, and Korl waited patiently for him to continue, unsure whether his words were simply a warning or whether they were the precursor to some kind of recommendation.

Finally he resumed. "I am going to ask you to do something for us. But before I do, let me just say that you may find my request to be... unacceptable. If so, please try not to hold it against us. Truly, I mean no offence. I am simply concerned with doing what is best for the Anchaiki. If you do not find my suggestion to have any merit, you must say so."

Puzzled, Mitcheka frowned, but she nodded for him to continue.

"I want you to try to persuade these people to accept a sub-space radio receiver."

Mitcheka Korl shot him an incredulous look. "That runs contrary to all their beliefs! And after all your soul searching about whether or not to bring the children home, I would have thought that it would run counter to yours, too."

Picard sighed. "I did not make the decision to ask you lightly, I can assure you."

Korl thought back over the dealings that she had had with the Captain. She could not claim to know him well, but she suspected that he probably never made decisions without very careful consideration first. She looked out of the window, then back to his face.

Finally she said, "If the choice is compromising their beliefs to ensure the children's safety, or maintaining the purity of their life-style, I expect the Anchaiki will settle for compromise. At least, I hope they will."

"So. You'll help us."

"Yes, Captain. I guess I will."

"Thank you."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Tears pricked at Roja's eyes and she wrapped her arms tightly around Counselor Troi's neck. The Betazoid gently cradled the child and asked, "Can't you tell me what the matter is?"

Roja sniffled and said, "I don't want to go home."

"But you said that you did."

"I know. But that was before."

"Before?"

"I miss my Mum and Dad. Really I do. And I want to see them again, but..."

"But?"

"I'm scared!" The child's panicked grip tightened as though she could draw strength directly from the Counselor's body, like a leech draws blood. "What if it happens again?!"

Troi did not need to ask what Roja was talking about; the child's fear was only natural. She had been stolen from out of her own home once; why should she think that it was safe to go back? "Roja. Listen to me. Your parents love you, and you love them. They must be terribly frightened about what has happened to you."

"I suppose so."

"Don't you want them to know that you are all right?"

"Yes."

"I'll come with you, and explain that you are frightened. I'm sure that they will understand. Remember, they'll be concerned to make sure that nothing like this happens again." The girl's grip loosened a little. Deanna said, "You do trust your parents to look after you, don't you?"

"Yes."

"And you'll try not to be too afraid?"

"I'll try."

"Good."

Deanna Troi put the child down, stood

up, and looked at Riker and Korl. "Roja is the seventh child this morning to say that she is too frightened to go home. It's going to be a long job, settling these children back into their families. In some cases it is going to mean finding out where they come from. And it is going to require so many questions and explanations." She sighed.

Korl said, "I'd like to help."

"Mitcheke, that's a very kind offer, but you've done enough for us already. We can't ask you to do even more," Riker replied. "In any case, you've got your own family to find."

"I've waited sixty years for that; I don't think that a few more days will hurt. In any case, I've grown to like the kids. I just want to make sure that they get home safely. Particularly the scared ones like Roja. And Kitia, of course."

Troi traded glances with Riker. There was no doubt that Korl's help would be invaluable; she knew these people better than they could ever hope to. He nodded silent agreement to her unspoken request, and she said, "We'd love to have your help. Again."

"Good."

It was midday and the sun beat down on Miradi's back as he weeded the vegetable garden. Inside the house, his wife Claris was working in the kitchen, and enticing smells wafted past him on the gentle summer breeze. Birds sang and insects buzzed. Everything was as it should be.

No. Not everything.

If only we knew what had happened to Kitia! The old man found his thoughts

travelling a familiar path. Not knowing is tearing the family apart. She's my great-grand-daughter. Look at what this has done to Claris and me... and her parents hurt so much! After all this time... She must be dead. But how can I say that to them when I don't want to believe it myself. If only we knew for sure, then perhaps we could let go of the past. Get on with our lives. Inevitably his thoughts drifted back to the time when his son and daughter-in-law had gone missing. The bodies of the young couple had been discovered weeks later at the bottom of a gorge along one of the mountain roads... The memories still hurt, although years had passed.

He shook his head, as if to throw out the melancholy thoughts. It didn't work though; it never did.

Under the fruit trees at the bottom of the garden, Mantho, the family finga, caught a whiff of... something familiar... on the breeze. His nose twitched, then he raised his head, ears cocked and eyes wide open. Suddenly he was up on his feet and yelping with excitement.

"Hush, boy!" Miradi commanded, but the usually obedient animal took no heed of his master's voice. Instead the beast ran to the fence and yelped some more, pawing at the wooden struts as he did so.

Reluctantly Miradi turned his attention from the weeding and strolled over. "Now, now Mantho. What's all the fuss about, then?" He rested a wizened hand on the finga's head.

Then he looked in the direction of the animal's gaze and saw them.

Two women and a man.

And a child.

So closely in tune was the sight to his earlier thoughts that, for a moment, he feared he was hallucinating. Then he

shouted, "Claris! Claris! Come out here!"

"What's all the shouting about?" Miradi's wife, stooped with age, came hurrying around the side of the house. Then, as she saw what he was looking at, she said, "Is that?..."

"It looks like her! I don't know who the others are, but..." With that, he unlatched the gate. Mantho bolted into the pitted road and ran towards the advancing group. Miradi and Claris followed after the pet more slowly.

The child saw the approaching finga, shouted, "Mantho!" and ran ahead of the adults accompanying her.

Child and animal embraced each other enthusiastically. After a few moments of frantic licking and patting, Kitia looked up and saw her elderly relatives. "Great Granny! Grampy!" And she rushed into their arms, too. "Where are Mum and Dad?"

"Out in the fields. They'll be in soon."

There were tears in their eyes as the three of them hugged, and Deanna Troi held Mitcheka Korl and William Riker back until the elderly couple remembered to ask the inevitable bewildered questions.

Finally Miradi turned to face the strangers and said, "Where did you find her?"

"It's a long story," said Riker. "Might we come inside?"

Once they were all settled in the living room, Deanna said, "I think, perhaps, it would be best if Kitia told you what has happened to her. We will gladly answer any questions that you may have afterwards."

Kitia glanced around. Grampy said, "Go on, child," and he smiled encouragingly at her.

Her story was long and complicated, but she had the undivided attention of her elderly relatives. When she spoke of boxes on wheels and the city the couple stared at her in horrified recognition. Mitcheka had been right: Exa was still in living memory of some of the Anchaiki.

Finally the elderly couple turned towards the Starfleet officers and said, "Who would do such a thing? And *why*?"

Riker shook his head slightly. "Who appears to have been one of the planet's politicians, and his associates. 'Why' is rather harder to answer. It seems to have been for some kind of barbaric game. Kitia wasn't the only child who was abducted. We've brought back nearly a hundred Anchaiki children."

Kitia nodded agreement. "The journey back was *fun*. We organised a party and—"

The door to the living room opened and a woman entered. As she saw her grand-parents she began to say, "Oh! There you are!" But the words died on her lips as she saw the strangers.

Then they, in turn, were forgotten as she saw her daughter. And then there were more hugs and kisses, and more tears at the joyful reunion.

Eventually the three visitors decided that it was time to go.

Miradi walked them to the gate. Troi looked at him and said, "It has been hard for her, and it'll be difficult for her to readjust to living here, with all of you."

"I know. And I'll try to explain that to her parents, too. But, for now, we're just happy to have her home again. Problems

can wait until later."

Troi nodded. "Well. Good luck."

The elderly man smiled. "Thank you. And thank you for bringing her back to us."

Finally the last of the children were gone, and the time came for the Enterprise bridge crew to say good-bye to their new friend.

They assembled in Transporter Room Three to bid farewell to Mitcheka Korl.

Mitcheka shook Jean-Luc Picard's hand and said, "Thank you, Captain. For everything."

"I think that it is we who should thank you. Your help has been invaluable."

"So I've been told. Several times." She smiled with good humour.

"That is because it is true. Your assistance with the children is appreciated, and I am also very grateful that you managed to persuade the elders to take a radio."

Korl nodded, and her smile faded slightly. "Some of them still aren't happy. But they see the necessity of it. What some of those children went through doesn't bear thinking about."

Troi sighed and said, "I know. But they will think about it, and remember. They are going to require a lot of love and understanding."

"I know. And I'll do all that I can to help."

In a deliberate attempt to lighten the mood Picard said, "I gather that you

found you had a cousin still living."

Mitcheka laughed. "Yes. Synthi. I remember her from when we were kids. She used to be skinny and freckled. Now she's fat and ruddy-faced! Oh, well, I suppose that I've changed just as much. Anyway, she's invited me to stay with her." She shrugged. "It's a new beginning."

"Yes, well. Good luck."

"And to you all."

Picard nodded to Chief O'Brien and said, "Energise."

They waved and waited until the last of the shimmer faded.

Geordi La Forge put his coffee down, looked across the table and said, "So, what did you think of it all, Data?"

"You are referring to the party?"

"Yeah."

"It was an intriguing experience. But I still question its relevance, and there are aspects of it that I still do not understand."

"Yes, I know. But did you *enjoy* it?"

"Geordi - "

"Let me guess. You can't enjoy anything."

"Correct." Data watched, fascinated, as Geordi's face lost its good humour and settled into a disappointed expression. Why was it that his Human friends were always so determined to get some sort of emotional response from him, even though they knew it was impossible? Data thought for a few moments then

said, "Nonetheless, there was something inexplicably... satisfying... about a party having been held in my honour. Perhaps it was the attention it engendered?"

"Perhaps."

The two friends lapsed into a companionable silence which was only disturbed by the arrival of Keiko Ishikawa.

"Hello, Data! Commander La Forge! Even allowing for the fact that Data and she were friends, her greeting was unusually enthusiastic.

Data looked at Keiko and said, "You appear to be very happy this afternoon."

Keiko smiled broadly. "I am. Data, thank you for introducing me to Miles the other day. He's cute!" Data blinked as he tried to process the comment. 'Cute' was not a word that he associated with the Transporter Chief. He opened his mouth to say something, but Keiko was still chattering enthusiastically. "Yesterday evening Miles gave me a tour of the transporter rooms, and this evening we are going to meet in the arboretum."

"Is Chief O'Brien interested in flora?" queried the android.

"I... Yes, very," said Keiko, with her cheeks flushing. "I'd better get going. Thanks again, Data!"

After she'd gone, Data looked at Geordi, a faint frown on his pale face, and said, "I was not aware that Chief O'Brien was interested in plants. And, until now, Keiko has expressed no interest in transporter technology, either."

Geordi chuckled. "I think that they are more interested in each other."

"Geordi?"

"Romance, Data! Think *romance*!"

her husband asked.

"Ah. I have to confess that I had not considered that possibility; I know little about courtship rituals."

Geordi smiled.

"Do you suppose that they will get married?"

The Engineer held up his hands and said, "Whoa there, Data! They've only just started seeing each other."

"This could be an interesting case study," Data said. "I shall watch with interest."

He thought back over the preceding conversation, then asked, "Geordi, do you think Chief O'Brien is cute?"

La Forge wiped a hand across his face, sighed, and wondered how he could cope with Data's latest interest.

Kitia's mother listened to her child's breathing, leaned over, and kissed her forehead.

Then she stood up and left the room.

The rest of the family looked up as she came down the stairs. "Is everything all right, now?"

"She's asleep, at least. Bay, I don't think we can begin to understand what she's gone through... And the way she refused to let me open the window..." Big fat tears slid down her face.

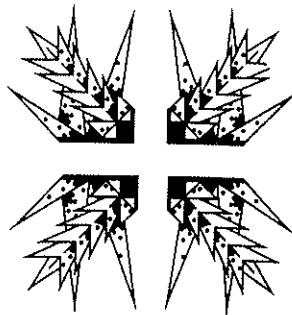
Bay came across and put his arm around his wife's shoulders. "I don't blame her for being scared, Jo. I mean, from what I can gather, she was stolen from inside the bedroom. Children should feel safe at home. Secure. But this?"

"Don't get me wrong. I'm so glad to have her back, but..." Jo's voice died away as she failed to put her worries into words.

"But," said Miradi, "it's going to be a long time before we get used to having her home again. And it's going to take even longer for her to get used to being here."

"Yes. It's never going to be the way it was before, is it? And I can't help wondering if she'll ever feel safe again."

Upstairs, in the darkened room, Kitia stirred in her sleep. Her eyes blinked open and she found herself alone. Pale moonlight crept through the slats in the window shutters. Long shadows loomed in the corners of the room and Kitia shivered, and shrank deep down into her bedclothes as she thought she saw one of them move.



THE RIGHT DECISION

by

Arline Lawrie

I sit here and wonder - did I make the right decision?
Should I have taken more time to think about the future,
rather than take the easier path that I did?

I remember thinking then that you would tie me
down, stop me from doing what I had always dreamed of
- being the youngest Captain in Starfleet history. Was I
just using that as a excuse not to have to give myself
completely to just one woman?

I realise now that they were just childish fears; and
now you are with someone else. I can see what an idiot I
have been for not trying harder to tell you how I really
felt.

I wish I could go back and do it all again, differently -
but I know that will never happen.

You are happy now, and I must try to be too, for
your sake. The memories I have of the special times we
share will live forever

- and even though you are with him, you will
always be my Imzadi.



